

HONORING HEROES: MEMORIALIZING OUR NATION'S VETERANS

HEARING

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND
MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
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HONORING HEROES: MEMORIALIZING OUR NATION'S VETERANS

Thursday, June 7, 2018

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE
AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS,
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 11:13 a.m., in Room 334, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Mike Bost [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Bost, Coffman, Radewagen, Roe, Esty, and Lamb.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MIKE BOST, CHAIRMAN

Mr. BOST. Good morning and welcome. This oversight hearing of the Committee of Disabilities and Assistance and Memorial Affairs will now come to order.

Before we begin, I want to welcome the Full Committee Chairman, Phil Roe, to the hearing with us today. Today, we are going to be discussing how our Nation honors veterans who have passed on.

It is appropriate that we are holding this hearing so close to Memorial Day and yesterday's anniversary of D-Day, and the 100th anniversary of the deadliest day of battle of Belleau Woods when General John J. Percy ordered a counteroffensive to drive the Germans out of Belleau Wood during World War I.

I recently had the privilege to travel with Chairman Roe to visit some of the most hallowed ground in the world, including that very battlefield and others.

On June 6th, 1918, the U.S. Marines, under the command of General James Harbord, led the attack against four German divisions in Belleau Wood.

I couldn't help but think about that battle as we walked through the cemetery and the woods itself. Belleau Wood is very important to me, not just because I am a Marine, but one of the Marines who fought at Belleau Wood, Private Paul Stout, was born in Jackson County, Illinois, right near my hometown. He survived the battle of Belleau Wood, but he fell July 19, 1918, less than a month later while the Marines were advancing through the French countryside.

My American Legion post, my home American Legion post, 127 in Murphysboro, Illinois, now bears the name of Paul Stout. I thought about Paul Stout, Private Stout, and the rest of those determined and bullheaded Devil Dogs who spent June 6, 1918, re-

peatedly charging entrenched German forces with no thought of regret, and too many men are still there.

But by the end of that day, Marines had suffered more than 1,000 casualties. It was the bloodiest day of the battle, which went on for almost 4 weeks. Eventually, the Marines drove the Germans out, but at a horrible cost.

By the event of the battle of Belleau Wood, almost 10,000 Americans were dead, wounded, or missing in action. And walking among the graves of those brave men who fought and died so far from home was one of the most moving experiences of my life.

It was overwhelming to think that each headstone was a monument to a husband, a father, a son, or a brother who didn't make it home. It was unforgettable. It was also incredibly inspiring.

That visit reminded me of how much I owe to these fallen heroes, and I am very grateful that I was able to honor them. Every American should have that experience. We all need to be reminded that the freedom we enjoy is because of the brave men and women who serve in our Armed Forces. We also need to ensure that future generations understand that our freedom will always depend on the service and sacrifice of our Nation's veterans.

The NCA and the ABMC are responsible for maintaining national cemeteries, not just to demonstrate our gratitude, but to help inspire our children and our grandchildren to follow the example of patriotism and service embodied by those resting in these cemeteries. That is the only way the United States will continue to be a free country.

This is why this hearing is so important. As Chairman of this Subcommittee, I don't hear many complaints about the NCA and ABMC taking care of our national cemeteries, but there is always more we can do. And certainly, I know the NCA and the ABMC have ideas for improvements. And I am looking forward to hearing from our witnesses about ways that we can better honor these extraordinary Americans.

So thank you again for being here today. I will now yield to Ranking Member Esty for any opening remarks she may have.

OPENING STATEMENT OF ELIZABETH ESTY, RANKING MEMBER

Ms. ESTY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I, too, note that it is very appropriate that we are having this hearing today, a day after the 74th anniversary of D-Day, and I must note, my husband's birthday. It is very easy to remember.

I have been reflecting on our duty as Members of this Committee to ensure the respectful and dignified memorialization in perpetuity of America's military veterans. And I want to welcome Under Secretary Reeves to his new position, leading the National Cemetery Administration, and I am looking forward to his ideas on how to further improve how the agency deals with veterans' families. And I want to let you know that, like Chairman Bost, I hear very good reports. And so we want to continue to ensure that we are serving veterans and their families in the way we would all want to.

Because this is the first hearing since 2014 on NCA, I want to take a moment to publicly recognize the heroism of the National

Cemetery's workforce in Florida and Puerto Rico following the hurricanes last year.

This Committee was receiving daily updates on VA asset damage and operational status. And on the very first day, on the very first day, the reports were that cemetery employees were reporting in for duty within hours of the storm passing in each case. Burials continued as scheduled within 36 hours despite power outages and damage.

It was heroic. It was heroic of these people, many of whose homes were destroyed or damaged or flooded, whose families were, themselves, in distress, and I don't think they have ever properly gotten the credit and the thanks from Congress and the American people that they deserve for continuing to do their duty and to ensure that we properly memorialize and care for those who have served this country.

So I want you to know how much we appreciate that. And we recognize there is no amount of compensation that can provide and compensate for that sort of devotion to duty. And I wanted to make sure we recognize that in our hearing today.

I also want to recognize and welcome Secretary Matz. Congratulations on the work the Commission is doing all over the world to ensure that the cemeteries and memorials honoring fallen American servicemembers continue to be as beautiful and hallowed places of remembrance as we would want them to be, but more and more, as places to educate visitors who have no direct memory or knowledge of the battles that were fought nearby.

This Committee recently visited the American cemetery in Normandy. I understand that there is a new visitor's center and that if the site is to be preserved, the Commission has plans to design and install new pedestrian walks. And having visited that cemetery with my children about 15 years ago, I can tell you, for them, as young Americans, it was so remarkable that visit of just seeing row after row after row and contemplating the young men who fell who are now younger than my children are now, was striking and overwhelming.

It is very different than what you read in textbooks. It is vivid and remarkable. So preserving those sites, and again, the education aspect is part of what our Nation needs to memorialize and to remember and to understand the consequences were and what our responsibilities are in the world.

I look forward to hearing from you Secretary Matz about these plans and what is planned for next year's 75th commemoration of D-Day.

I want to also welcome our good friends from the VFW and The American Legion, our witnesses here today. You always join us and provide incredibly important perspective and feedback about what is happening on the ground. It is not just the laws we pass and regulations and the funding, it needs to work for people. And you help ensure that we understand whether our good intentions are being realized for the families and the veterans we are honored to serve. Your work with the Subcommittee is greatly appreciated and greatly needed.

Mr. Matz, I want to, again, let you know how much we appreciate your work on toxic exposure. We are very proud—Mr.

Wiseman. Where is Mr. Wiseman? I am sorry. Okay. I skipped a line here. We know you are moving on. Moving on to be the Virginia State VFW commander, but please know our gratitude to you because of your work, in part, on your fierce advocacy on toxic exposure. We are so pleased to have been unable to move forward on Blue Water veterans, an issue near and dear to your heart, and that of many veterans.

I can tell you in my district and Chairman Bost's district, and around this country, that has been a long, hard-fought battle, and you have helped us get near to the finish line. And I want to thank you for your work on that, for Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange in Thailand whose children were born with spina bifida will also appreciate so much your hard work. So—

Mr. WISEMAN. Thank you.

Ms. ESTY [continued].—thank you. And wish you well on your next endeavor. Again, I want to thank the Chairman and the Chairman for holding today's hearing. We look forward to your testimony.

Again, thank you all very much for the work you do serving our Nation's veterans.

Mr. BOST. Thank you, Ms. Esty. Chairman Roe, do you have any opening remarks?

OPENING STATEMENT OF PHIL ROE, CHAIRMAN, FULL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. ROE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I am feeling a little bit outnumbered here with all these Marines. And Mr. Coffman could be in the Army or Marines, so what we will do, is we will have them, two Army and two Marines, if that is okay with you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank you all both, and Ranking Member Esty, for holding this hearing today. And one of my priorities is ensuring that our Nation's veterans receive a proper resting place.

Last month, the Chairman mentioned, I and others on the Committee were honored to visit several overseas cemeteries and monuments for the brave men and women who served in World Wars I and II. And some of you already may know this, but before World War I, most of our fallen heroes were buried on the battlefield. And after the Great War, our country realized that some families may want to bring their loved one's home who perished in battle back to the United States, while others may want them buried overseas where they fell in service to our country.

And as the Chairman mentioned, in the battle of Belleau Woods, we walked—I literally cannot imagine going across that wheat field, which is still a wheat field today, in machine gun fire that those men did. It is literally amazing. And also to be at that cemetery to see where walls, literally walls of marbled names that they never found that were missing in that. And really remarkable.

And also, that this particular battle became of very interest to me as I learned more about it, is that it is the second infantry division, which I was in, was stood up in 1917. It was 100 years old last year. That was our 100th anniversaries, the second AD. And it is the only American Army Division that has ever been commanded by a Marine. And Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, obvi-

ously named after General Lejeune who also commanded the second Army Division. And these Marines were assigned to the second infantry division.

So there was a lot of history for me that I had really passed over in school and really got deep into. And it is an amazing part of our history. And most people in this country don't realize the ferocity of those battles. And I mean, this was hand-to-hand combat, when you are looking at four divisions. And we are looking at a very small piece of real estate. It wasn't very big at all. So really, rather amazing.

And since overseas cemeteries are thousands of miles from American soil, the United States established the American Battle Monuments Commission, or ABMC, in 1923 to ensure that those graves are properly maintained. And I can assure you, Mr. Director, they are properly maintained.

Now these cemeteries memorials are a symbol of our Nation's commitment to preserving democracy. And I will never forget visiting these incredible monuments for the brave men who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to our great Nation.

One experience that resonates with me personally, is I visited the graves of three of my Tennessee brothers, Robert Tester, Glenn Tester, and James Tester, who lost their lives in service to our Nation during World War II. The Tester brothers perished in three separate countries during the war, but at the request of their family, they were buried side-by-side at the Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery. And these young men came from one of, I think, nine children, this family. And they grew up in a little community called New Victory, Tennessee, which is in Washington County, where I live.

So seeing that they were laid to rest, reminded me of the sacrifices that were made to secure the future of our country, and I am forever grateful for their patriotism.

As I look over their headstones, and I have pictures of them on my camera, I remember that these men were more than just soldiers, but they were men who had left the comfort of their homes, and tragically, never returned.

I couldn't stop thinking about what their mother and other family members must have felt when they learned about the three deaths. I can't imagine how hard it must have been for their mother to have to have made the choice to bury them so far from home. Yet, I can't help but think that she made the right choice.

The Henri-Chapelle Cemetery is beautifully landscaped and cared for, and respectfully maintained. It is an appropriate resting place for the Tester brothers and their comrades in arms.

And I would certainly, as Ms. Esty said, encourage any Americans traveling abroad to travel to any one of these sites and be inspired by the stories of those who are there now.

I would also like to thank the NCA and the ABMC for their efforts to memorialize our veterans accordingly, and I look forward to hearing from all the witnesses today about how we can improve, how we honor our Nation's heroes.

And again, Chairman Bost, thanks so very much for holding this hearing, and I yield back.

Mr. BOST. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First off, I ask all other Members waive their opening remarks as per the Committee's custom. I want to welcome the witnesses who have joined us this morning, and thank you for taking the time to be here today.

Our first witness is the Honorable Randy C. Reeves, who is the Under Secretary of Memorial Affairs. He is accompanied by Mr. Ronald E. Walters, the NCA's Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Memorial Affairs. Also joining us today is the Honorable William M. Mats, Jr., who is the Secretary of the American Battles Monument Commission.

Testifying on behalf of The American Legion is Mr. Gerardo Avila, who is the Deputy Director of the MEB and PEB and DoD Correction Board.

Joining us also for the—is this our last time?

Mr. WISEMAN. For this Committee, it is. I will be delivering the burn pit testimony this afternoon.

Mr. BOST. Okay. All right. Well, thank you for your service and everything you have done here. But VFW is Mr. Ken Wiseman, the Associate Director of the National Legislative Services.

So welcome to all of you. I want to remind the witnesses that your complete written statement will be entered into the hearing record. And before we begin, I want to—we need to understand that the Under Secretary Reeves graciously reworked his schedule so he could be here for most of the hearing, but due to a long-standing commitment, he has to leave early to catch a plane, and we will understand that.

But Principal Deputy Under Secretary Walters will remain here at the hearing and be available to answer questions for NCA issues.

Under Secretary Reeves, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF HONORABLE RANDY C. REEVES

Mr. REEVES. Thank you. Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Esty, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I am deeply honored to be here to provide an update on the National Cemetery Administration. I appreciate being here with Secretary Matz, who is a strong partner of the VA.

The Monuments Commission, the ABMC, continues to do great work, and I thank you for that. I am honored to be here, also, with our key veteran's service organization partners from The American Legion, and from the VFW, who provide critical support to us and to the veteran community.

Here with me, also, from my staff, as you mentioned, is Ron Walters, who is my Principal Deputy Under Secretary.

It is, of course, my greatest honor to be able to serve America's veterans and their families as the sixth Under Secretary of Memorial Affairs at the National Cemetery Administration.

Over the past few months, I have traveled across the Nation, and I continue to be in awe of the commitment and dedication of our NCA professionals.

As Under Secretary, I have directed one simple vision for NCA, and that is, to ensure that no veteran ever dies.

You die the first time when breath leaves you for the very last time, but you only truly die sometime in the future when no one

tells your story or speaks your name. And I am committed to ensuring that our veterans don't suffer that second death.

From this vision, we have established three key priorities that align with VA's core mission and NCA's long-range plan. These are: preserving the legacy, which is ensuring no veteran ever dies; providing access and choosing VA for our veterans; and partnering to serve veterans.

I am pleased to note that in conversations that I have had with many Members of Congress, I have found that you share these priorities, and, again, you are helping us ensure that no veteran ever dies.

NCA is dedicated to preserving the legacy of our Nation's veterans, and VA's Veterans' Legacy Program supports a series of partnerships between VA and academic institutions and engage university students to research veteran stories and reach our youngest generation by teaching K-12 students about the sacrifice of our previous generations.

To complement Legacy, VA is creating an interactive Web site that will allow veterans' families to upload letters, pictures, photos, and videos to be shared with the public. And one day, visitors will be able to use smart phones to scan a veteran's headstone and learn their story. That is the future. And I can tell you, the future is here now. I have seen it tested, and it works.

Our second priority is to ensure that NCA continues to improve burial access and choice for veterans and their families. To accomplish this, NCA plans to open or expand existing VA national cemeteries while recognizing the need to provide burial options to rural and urban veterans.

NCA will establish seven rural national cemeteries and five urban national cemeteries over the next few years. We appreciate the great support of Congress by passing the Black Hills National Cemetery Boundary Expansion Act signed by the President on May 25th, which will allow NCA to obtain land from the Bureau of Land Management adjacent to our existing cemetery.

We are also appreciative of other recent legislation which expanded the casket and urn benefit for unclaimed veterans buried in State and Tribal cemeteries, and expanded the eligibility for medallion based on the date of death.

The Subcommittee's support in getting these bills, and various others, is a reflection of your understanding in support of our enduring mission.

Our third priority is to continue our valuable partnership with State and Tribal organizations through our Veterans Cemetery Grants Program. It is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. And since 1978, the Grants Program has awarded over \$766 million in grants, which funded 110 State and Tribal cemeteries in 47 States, Guam and Saipan.

We look forward to your assistance as we keep moving forward with this valuable program, and these efforts are designed to meet NCA's strategic goal of providing reasonable burial access to 95 percent of eligible veterans. And we are also working on, what I call, the hardest 5 percent.

Those that are hard to reach in our rural areas and those that have those long distances to travel and such so that they may also be honored.

We are committed to find ways to reach them and look forward to working with you and many other partners, and I welcome Members of the Committees, as well as their staff to visit our national cemeteries at any time and to reach out to me personally for any meeting requests.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for allowing me to be here today, and I look forward to answering any questions that the Subcommittee may have. Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF RANDY REEVES APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. BOST. Thank you. And Secretary Matz, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF HONORABLE WILLIAM M. MATZ, JR.

Mr. MATZ. Mr. Chairman, Chairman Roe, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the mission, the operations, and the programs of the American Battle Monuments Commission. And the subject of this hearing, I noted, is honoring heroes, memorializing our Nation's veterans. And this is so appropriate to our agency mission. And that sentiment inspires the thoughts that I want to share with you this morning.

Since the agency's establishment in 1923, our purpose has not changed, and it is to commemorate the service and the achievements of America's Armed Forces.

We execute our mission by creating memorials worldwide where U.S. forces have served, and by maintaining overseas military cemeteries. These are shrines to our fallen and to those that fought by their side.

Our first Chairman, General John Pershing, he set the tone for the Commission when he wrote that, and I quote, "time will not dim the glory of their deeds."

These simple but very powerful words are, in fact, the foundation of everything we do. When the President selected me to serve as Secretary of the Commission, he presented me with an opportunity of a lifetime, one that I don't take for granted. Preserving these national treasures as symbols of selfless devotion and beacons of freedom, this is not a job for me, folks. It is a reverent calling. In fact, it is a duty for this former infantryman.

Over this past Memorial Day weekend, we conducted ceremonies at all 26 of our cemeteries, in 10 countries, spanning four continents. And on Sunday morning of that weekend, the 27th of May, just 10, 12 days ago, I stood at a podium in Aisne-Marne American cemetery in France, it was one of the cemeteries that your codel had an opportunity to visit recently.

The Aisne-Marne Cemetery and the Belleau Wood battlefield that you mentioned, sir, behind it honored those who fell in the Aisne-Marne campaign. Memorialized there, shoulder-to-shoulder, are more than 2,600 soldiers and nearly 500 Marines who died during that campaign.

Then on Sunday afternoon, 3 hours later, we were over at the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery, and I understand your visit did not permit you to go to that one, but we want you to sometime return and visit that one. But at the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery where we, again, offered our thanks and respect to those who died in service to our Nation. There are 6,012 war dead buried in those beautiful grounds and 241 on the walls of the missing, most of whom lost their lives on nearby battlefields.

One of the dead, one of the dead in that cemetery is Sergeant Joyce Kilmer, 165 Infantry, 42nd Division. He rests in Plot B, Row 9, Grave 15. Probably best known for writing the poem, Trees.

He also wrote these prophetic words taken from the poem Rouge Bouquet, and I quote, "There is on earth no worthier grave to hold the bodies of the brave than the place of pain and pride where they nobly fought and nobly died."

In July 1918, Kilmer's 42nd Rainbow Division was attempting to break German defensive position just a few kilometers from the cemetery. In 8 days of fighting, that Rainbow Division lost 5,500 men. One of those men was Sergeant Joyce Kilmer. Then on Sunday evening of that same day, I stood at the Chateau-Thierry Monument, which you were able to visit, and we appreciate very much. This is not far from the Aisne-Marne cemetery, and we were there to dedicate a new visitor center.

It tells the story of men and women, like Joyce Kilmer, providing historical context for events that occurred there 100 years ago. And so on that Sunday, May 27th, three historic sites in honor and commemoration underscoring, in my view, the importance of this morning's themes are honoring heroes, memorializing our Nation's veterans.

So what motivates a man to leave the safety of his trench, to crawl through barbed wire, to attack enemy positions with rifle and bayonet when artillery machine gun fire halts his unit's advance? How do we ensure that we never forget such courageous service and sacrifice?

Since 2007 opening of our Normandy American Cemetery Visitors Center, ABMC has recognized its responsibility to answer those questions by telling the stories of the men and the women honored at these cemeteries and monuments, providing historical context for visitors now far removed from the events of the war years.

No one had to tell our first visitors the story. They were the mothers, the fathers, the widows, brothers, sisters of the war dead. They did not seek nor require context. They knew all too well the story. They came to grieve, not to learn in the 1920s, 1930s. They came to say farewell.

Meticulously maintaining cemeteries and memorials is and will remain ABMC's core mission, but that alone is no longer enough to honor those who serve. The Commission must also preserve and communicate their stories of competence, courage and sacrifice. And so it goes to the Congresswoman's initial comments about education. The visitor center at Chateau-Thierry is the 7th the Commission has opened since 2007. Three more are in development, all with a common purpose, and that is, to enrich the visitor's experience and understanding of the importance of these sacred sites,

and the significance of the historic events that led to their creation, and to educate our young children.

We also pursued an educational outreach program in the United States. And we are doing this through partnerships with universities and organizations like the National History Day and the National World War II Museum in New Orleans.

And, folks, I invite you to visit our educational program Web site at ABMCEducation.org to view the wealth of stories and lesson plans that are developed by teachers for teachers.

We have begun to partner with the National Cemetery Administration on World War II content, tying the stories of national cemeteries to those from the overseas cemeteries.

Through all of this, we have not forgotten, though, our core mission of building monuments to commemorate service and sacrifice.

Last year, we dedicated a monument in Dartmouth, England commemorating the Allied build-up, training and actual launching of the D-Day invasion from the shores of England, and the commemorative bronze plaque there in the Britannia Royal Naval College, which served as the XI Amphibious Force headquarters in World War II which oversaw the command of the entire invasion force.

Later this year, we are going to dedicate a U.S. memorial in the National War Memorial Park in Wellington, New Zealand, and a monument in Iceland commemorating U.S. primarily naval operations there in World War II is also in the early stages of development.

So these two commemorations will bring the total number of ABMC memorials and monuments to 31. And, of course, next year, as has been already mentioned, we will commemorate the 75th anniversary of D-Day. To prepare for that historic event, we are refreshing the exhibits at the Normandy Visitors Center. Eleven years have passed since the original exhibits opened to the public. And over the next couple of years, we are also going to be improving the cemeteries' entrance, traffic flow, parking upgrade and add to existing comfort facilities, and, of course, revamp the security screening areas to better handle peak visitation periods.

And I will tell you, we are able to do this as a result of Congress' \$30 million one-time appropriation in 2016. And believe me, I think we are good stewards. We are putting all of that to good use.

At the Pointe du Hoc Ranger Monument just west of Normandy, we are developing a site master plan to address the challenges posed by the dual need of providing visitors a positive and safe experience while protecting the integrity of this historic cultural landscape.

With the support of the Subcommittee and by the authority of the public law, as you know, we assumed ownership of the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Cemetery just outside Paris in January 2017. This memorial honors American combat aviation pioneers, 49 of whom are interred in a crypt beneath the monument next to two French aviators.

We will better tell their incredible story next year when we complete a conversion of the caretakers' cottage on the site into a small visitor's center, and we are working to improve the appearance of

the memorial grounds to an ABMC standard while preserving their naturally rustic character.

And finally, I am happy to report that the restoration of the Clark Veterans Cemetery in the Philippines, where we have interred 8,600 Americans, is progressing well.

We are in the final stages of improvements in the plot areas where the headstones have been partially buried and unreadable, really, since the volcanic eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991.

And I want to thank the National Cemetery Administration, the Honorable Randy Reeves here, for partnering with us to provide more than 3,000 new headstones to replace those that were damaged beyond repair.

So, I say to the Committee, all of these programs and projects have a singular focus: to honor and to memorialize America's Armed forces, our heroes, for their unselfish and their dedicated service and sacrifice.

The poet, Archibald MacLeish, served as an ambulance driver, later as an artillery officer in World War I. MacLeish's poem, *The Young Dead Soldiers*, includes this very eloquent and timeless challenge. "They say, we were young, we have died. Remember us. They say, we leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning."

So many have given us their deaths. It is for us and our children for generations to come to give them meaning. That is, and it will remain the mission of the American Battle Monuments Commission. Mr. Chairman, that concludes my remarks, and I welcome any comments you might have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF WILLIAM M. MATZ APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. BOST. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Mr. Avila, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF GERARDO AVILA

Mr. AVILA. NCA's mission is simple: to honor veterans and their families with final resting places in national shrines with lasting tributes that commemorate the service and sacrifice to our Nation. This mission can be traced back to President Abraham Lincoln.

On July 17, 1862, President Lincoln signed legislation authorizing the President of the United States the power to purchase lands and establish national cemeteries to bury soldiers who died in the service of the country.

In 1973, a new law authorized the transfer of 82 national cemeteries from the Department of the Army to the Department of Veterans Affairs, essentially creating and establishing the NCA.

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Esty, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, on behalf of National Commander Denise H. Rohan, and the 2 million members of The American Legion, thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important topic.

NCA operates 135 national cemeteries, 33 solidier lots, along with monument sites in 40 States and Puerto Rico. Under its current purview, NCA is responsible for perpetuity care of 4.5 million interred veterans of every war and conflict, and family members.

NCA also provides funding to establish and expand and improve 109 cemeteries in 47 States and territories, including Tribal trust lands.

NCA provides headstones, markers, medallions to commemorate veterans service. From fiscal year 2017, NCA conducted over 171,000 internments in national and State cemeteries, provided more than 361 headstones and markers, 13,000 bronze medallions, and 670,000 presidential memorial certificates.

NCA's yearly customer satisfaction survey consistently receives ranks in the mid-1990s. The last result of the latest survey ranked at 99 percent on cemetery appearance, 96 percent on quality of service, and 99 percent of respondents say they would recommend to other veterans.

The American Legion have engaged our membership, and we regularly hear veterans echo the sentiment found at NSA's yearly satisfaction survey.

We frequently receive calls complimenting the level of professionalism displayed by NCA employees when rendering final respects for their loved ones.

The families often share with The American Legion that NCA surprisingly well-managed, understanding, and extremely helpful, which is quite contradictory to the expectations they had considering NCA is a division of the Department of Veterans Affairs, the second largest bureaucracy in the Federal Government.

Ensuring veterans receive their postmortem respect they deserve is a priority of The American Legion. In 1962, The American Legion created and established the Graves Registration at Memorial Affairs Committee, now known as the National Cemetery Committee, an internal committee designed to focus on these important issues impacting all veterans.

The American Legion maintains the professional staff dedicated to formulating and recommend to our National Executive Committee through the Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission, policies, plans, and programs as they relate to the National Cemetery Administration, and the internment of veterans, Active Duty servicemembers and their dependents.

Its response to issues and concerns, The American Legion adopted two resolutions at our 2016 National Convention: The Resolution No. 237, The American Legion supported legislation to amend the Code of Federal regulation 38-632 and specify the VA recognize accredited representatives be authorized to apply for a headstone, marker, or a medallion in the absence of next-of-kin.

This commonsense resolution was created because we have seen a number of cases where a deceased veteran was not able to receive a grave marker or have placement issue due to damage simply because the relative did not make the request.

The American Legion also created and passed Resolution No. 9, allowing us to support the transfer of land from the Bureau of Lands Management to NCA to expand the Black Hills National Cemetery in South Dakota. Two weeks ago, on May 25th, President Trump signed legislation transferring approximately 200 acres to expand the cemetery.

The passing of this legislation confirms the commitment and obligation we have to honor the memory of those that have served. The

American Legion is not aware of any obstacles to access for any veteran wishing that their final resting place be a cemetery operated by the NCA.

That stated, we do receive inquiries and concerns on two topics: The issuing of NCA headstones and markers for veterans buried in private cemeteries, and wait times when calling the scheduling office in St. Louis, Missouri.

It is our sincere hope that VA, NCA, and this Committee take a closer look, identify, and take the necessary corrections to the discrepancy between veterans who are authorized a headstone or marker in a private cemetery, and those who are not, and eliminating the wait times at the scheduling office.

Ensuring that those who have selflessly raised their right hand in defense of the Nation receive the honorable and respectable final resting place they deserve is the priority of The American Legion. And by action of this Committee, we can see it is for you as well.

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Esty, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share the position of 2 million members of this organization. I look forward to any questions you might have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF GERARDO AVILA APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. BOST. Thank you, Mr. Avila.

Mr. Wiseman, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF KEN WISEMAN

Mr. WISEMAN. Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Esty, and Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Veterans of Foreign of the United States and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the important issue of how our Nation memorializes our veterans.

VA's mission to provide veterans a final resting place worthy of their sacrifice to our Nation is a top priority for the VFW. While the National Cemetery Administration and the American Battle Monuments Commission generally do a good job, there are always ways to improve the delivery of memorial benefits to veterans.

We appreciate this opportunity to highlight several areas.

We hear from VFW posts around the world about the amazing work that ABMC is doing. VFW Post 605 in Paris France, reports that the ABMC efforts to care for cemeteries and monuments have resulted in some of the most emotionally moving experiences a visitor could have.

The VFW urges the Subcommittee to support efforts by ABMC to establish visitor centers which would allow visitors to properly honor and remember those who are buried in the cemeteries.

The centers will also allow for better use of staff so that they could focus on other management aspects of their job. The ABMC management of Clark Cemetery in the Republic the Philippines is another success story that the VFW is proud to report.

VFW Post 2485 in Angeles City, the Philippines, notes that the repairs and maintenance of the cemetery are superior, and burials continue in a way that allows Americans to be buried there with honor.

The VFW is very supportive of NCA's Veterans Legacy Project. VLP leverages technology to preserve history and spread awareness of the brave men and women buried in the cemeteries. Updates on each veteran can be provided to ensure the profile is accurate and truly reflects the life of the veteran.

Modern technology will allow VLP to be viewed through a mobile application, and online enabling future generations to learn about the sacrifices made by generations that came before them.

However, the VFW has learned that the call center for all VA-managed burials have become overwhelmed due to staffing issues.

A surviving sister of a veteran reported that she was told it would be at least 6 weeks before a burial could be processed for her brother, the deceased veteran. This is unacceptable.

The VFW calls for a review to ensure proper staffing is in place so that burials can be scheduled in a timely manner. And the Under Secretary has reached out to the VFW on this matter, and we appreciate his outreach.

The VFW strongly supports passage of H.R. 5588, legislation that would transfer Mare Island Naval Cemetery to NCA for management. The U.S. Navy use this cemetery as the final resting place for more than 800 veterans.

Included in this number are three medal of honor recipients. One of them is James Cooney. He was born in Ireland and emigrated to the United States. He enlisted in the United States Marine Corps and deployed with the first Marine Regiment to the Boxer Rebellion in China.

Private Cooney was awarded the Medal of Honor, the highest award of valor that can be bestowed upon an individual in the U.S. military for his distinguished service in the presence of the enemy.

Yet, VA has refused to take responsibility of ensuring that Private Cooney and the other honorable veterans buried at Mare Island Naval Cemetery has a final resting place worthy of their service to our Nation.

These are photos of headstones at Mare Island Naval Cemetery. This is unacceptable. And the VFW wants to see, and is willing to work with both the Committee and NCA to ensure that proper steps are taken.

The Mare Island Naval Cemetery is in disrepair, and the VFW will not rest until it is fixed and properly maintained. The lasting legacy of those who have served our countries on display in cemeteries and is a testament to the cost of freedom.

While our Nation remembers the service of veterans who are no longer with us on Memorial Day, NCA and ABMC ensure that a daily reminder withstands the test of time.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. And I want to thank you and the Ranking Member for the kind words at the beginning of the hearing. Your staff was key to all of the success that we have had so far with the Blue Water Navy bill.

I want to particularly thank Carolyn, Chris, and Maria for their help. They have represented you well, and I personally thank them. One of my key projects next year as a State commander and as an accredited service officer, is to find every Blue Water Navy sailor and every surviving spouse in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

On January 1st, the VA will be getting a whole lot of claims from Virginia. I thank you, I yield back, and I welcome your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF KEN WISEMAN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. BOST. Thank you, Mr. Wiseman.

Just so you know, I am going to go ahead and start the questioning. So I will yield myself 5 minutes for questions.

Secretary Matz, in your testimony, we know that Congress has recently passed legislation allowing the AMBC to take jurisdiction over the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Cemetery outside of Paris.

This memorial and cemetery, which I had the opportunity to visit last month, includes a final resting place for 49 American aviators who helped train French pilots before we entered World War I. I understand that the site was in rough shape when we took it over, but let me tell you that it looks very good, and, obviously, headed towards looking even better.

Can you please describe the work that you are doing there right now?

Mr. MATZ. Yes, sir, we took ownership in January of 2017. And prior to that, we partnered with what, heretofore, had been a French foundation and the French Government had actually owned the cemetery and the land. And from that partnership, we got \$1.7 million from the French Government and from those private funds, and did a lot of restoration there 2015 through 2016.

We cleaned, repaired the stonework, did some releaving, we did some repointing, repaired plaster and the—of course, if you got down into the crypt and the vault, that was leaking. So we put a lot of money into that and upgraded that. Also painting, metal work, et cetera.

What we have planned now, and as you say, you went through there, we have a project, as I mentioned very briefly in my opening comments, to turn the old caretakers' cottage into a small visitor's center.

And I will tell you, I report that is going along very nicely. Completion is anticipated next Memorial Day, and that should be a very nice dedication.

We are also in the process of looking at waterproofing and repaving the memorial surface there. And that is at a cost of \$1 million. Improving a disabled access ramp that we need there for folks. And also, replacing paths and curbstones. We also have a horticulturist in our Paris office, has been spending a lot of time there in the grounds to bring the grounds up to a standard, and the woodland areas up to a standard.

So these are the things we are looking at there. And in fact, I would say, folks from our Paris office are out there probably on a weekly basis seeing how we can continue to repair and bring that up-to-date.

Mr. BOST. That is wonderful because it has an unbelievable potential, and I know you will do well with that.

Mr. MATZ. Well, thank you, sir.

Mr. BOST. Under Secretary Reeves, can you describe for me the Legacy, the Preserving the Legacy Program in detail and what you see as a vision there?

Mr. REEVES. Mr. Chairman, thank you. The Veterans Legacy Program itself is set up to be able to have both an educational component that I discussed before and also what I like to look at as my prime mission. I am the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, so it is to memorialize and remember those who have served our country so well.

Through a number of different partnerships, and also partnerships with ABMC that were discussed earlier, we have awarded nine grants this year. The original program awarded three. So we have got that many, you know, universities and others who are doing the research and learning about those veterans, doing the lesson plans that are used in middle schools, high schools and others. But the other component is the component that we are developing so that you could walk up, as I said, with your smart phone and be able to put that smart phone in front of a headstone.

It will decipher the arrangement of the letters on the headstone and pull up the information about that veteran and their service; in most cases, where we are able to, the service that they provided and the things they did after military service. And when I said that the future is here, I have seen the demonstration at the University of Central Florida, and I was able to walk up to a headstone, it accessed the database, and I was able to see what that veteran had done, both before and after.

And I just want to bring this, you know, to a little bit of reality about what it is doing for students out there. I spoke to a graduate student at the University of Central Florida, and I asked, what does this program mean to you? And he looked at me with tears in his eyes, and he said, I was able to bring my veteran back to life.

And what he meant by that is it is a World War I veteran, African American who have served actually in Europe that had been lost through history. And through his research and his learning, he was able to tell that story, and now that veteran will never die.

Mr. BOST. Thank you. My time is expired.

Ms. ESTY, I recognize you for 5 minutes.

Ms. ESTY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And again, I want to thank all you gentlemen for your hard work joining us here today and making yourselves available to help ensure that we all fulfill our duty to honor and memorialize those who have served this country.

Under Secretary Reeves, I have three areas I am hoping to cover in the less than 5 minutes I have. One, is to Mr. Avila's question about clarifying the criteria for headstones in private cemeteries, that is questions that we often get as Members of Congress, and I think that would be helpful.

Two, on the wait times, which I know you are working on, but that was raised by both Mr. Avila and Mr. Wiseman. And again, I know that you have got some plans, and if you can briefly share with us your proposals going forward, I think that would be helpful for us to know. And also, hopefully, encourage veterans who may be watching or reading about this about how important it is to bring these concerns forward. That is the only way we can fix things is if we know about them.

And the last is on Mare Island. You and I discussed this yesterday. Thank you, Mr. Wiseman. And I know that Ms. Brownley was

hoping to join us, I think she had a scheduling conflict. As the daughter of a Navy man, grew up in Northern California, I am familiar with that. I will be seeing the site in the next week or two.

Mr. Reeves, we talked about this, Under Secretary Reeves, if you can talk about your proposal at this point to begin to address the sorry state of repair of the headstones, et cetera. And Mr. Bilirakis is not with us here. He is the cosponsor of that bill, and I would like you to address, if you can, all three of those. Thank you.

Mr. REEVES. Absolutely.

First of all, I will go ahead and address the wait times first, if that is okay.

The first thing I want to tell you is I called the call center myself this morning before I came here, at what would normally be a peak time. I went into the call queue and I was talking to a representative in less than 5 minutes. Okay? And I asked some questions about workload and those kinds of things, because I want to know what is going on in the field.

Secondly, one of the places I went first was the call center. I will be returning personally to the call center later this month. As you know, we provided copies of our plan that we are working on. I want to be fully transparent. We provided to both our VSO partners and to, also, your staff, and will provide it to anybody that would like to see what we are doing to rectify what I see as some issues that we have got there.

First of all, to that, one of the problems that we had that was showing, you know, peak, more than peak, you know, call times, had to do with our phone system. And we are working with our IT folks in VA getting, you know, very good support from that. And we will be, you know, correcting that. We have corrected some of the issues.

And also to the issue that Mr. Wiseman specifically, the specific case. I am going to be talking to that individual myself, because I am going to tell you, whether it is 6 weeks, whether it is actually 2 weeks, or any other time—and my numbers show me that it was about 2 weeks, and they may be wrong, so I am not assuming anything. So I am going to be talking to that individual myself.

If we have things like that, it doesn't go to my philosophy and our belief that we only have one time to get it right. That one time we don't get it right is one time too many. And I am going to correct that, I can assure you.

And we will work with the Committee and staff to provide any further information that you need. But I will be very detailed in those responses and the information I gave you. Okay?

Secondly, I will now go to Mare Island, because that is a little more complicated. First of all, I want to tell you that I was in California last week for some other events. And because this means so much to me, I went to Mare Island myself. And I am going to tell you, Mr. Wiseman, thank you for the passion that you and VFW have to bring the attention to this. My heart is broken. I got pictures, too. And I don't like them. And I am very upset by what I saw.

But beyond that, now I have to look at what really needs to be done. As soon as we found out about this, and this was in the

news, the National Cemetery Administration reached out to the city of Vallejo, California.

They also reached out to the Navy. And we have been working with the Navy to bring forth an IRT grant that would refurbish that cemetery. And I believe that should be approved fairly quickly. I can't speak for the Navy. I am not going to speak for their process, but I believe it should be approved fairly quickly. I think there is a good chance of that.

And then secondly, we have committed to doing whatever we need to do to replace headstones, or anything else that is there, to bring that to a standard where those veterans and their family members and others that are there, will be appropriately honored.

I do realize that Mare Island was transferred to the city of Vallejo in 1996, and there has been nothing to keep it in repair since that time, as far as I can tell.

I am not here to cast aspersions or throw rocks at anyone. What I am here to do is to tell you that what we need to focus on right now, I believe, is what steps we can take immediately. And those things that we are doing, that I have just described, to make sure that those veterans that are there are appropriately honored.

I will say one thing, and this is not anything other than the fact that I feel personally that we need to be careful about every time someone does, because there was an MOU between the Navy and Vallejo to keep this cemetery up. I would recommend that we be careful about immediately going to, say, we should take over something every time someone doesn't meet their obligation, because that could set a precedent that, you know, that maybe we don't want to. But that is a matter for the Committee and for Congress to consider, not me.

And then if I have answered that, then the headstones, and, let's see, I am going to have to get just a little bit of information on headstones.

I think the question was the inscription for the spouse, right? Is that correct?

Mr. WALTERS. Correct.

Mr. REEVES. Okay. We can't provide inscription for spouse or dependent on a headstone that is currently in a private cemetery, and that is based upon the statute. So we are following the law. And I can't, you know, ask or suggest, but, you know, if that is something that Congress might take up, you know, that might be appropriate.

And then we do have a legislative proposal that would allow us to do that. And I would like to be able to talk to your staffs and others, and our VSO partners, to be able to get more information on that for you and more detailed information.

Ms. ESTY. Thank you very much. I went over time. But—

Mr. REEVES. I am sorry.

Ms. ESTY. No. But I appreciate that and the transparency and importance of—again, on Mare Island, I think we need to start with getting it to an appropriate state where it should be, and then we will continue to stay at the table, and do our best to get it right.

Again, I want to thank you for your effort.

Mr. REEVES. And thank you for that, because, in any case, we need to focus first on honoring our veterans.

Ms. ESTY. Absolutely.

Thank you.

Mr. BOST. Thank you, Ms. Esty.

Mr. REEVES. Mr. Secretary, I would like to extend this until 12:30, sir.

Mr. BOST. Okay. That is fine.

Mr. REEVES. I am going to extend my—

Mr. BOST. We are just glad to have you here.

Mr. REEVES. They will just have to go fast, sir.

Mr. BOST. All right.

Mrs. Radewagen, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN. Thank you, Chairman Bost, and Ranking Member Esty for holding this hearing today. Thank you to the panel for your testimony. Honoring our fallen heroes is an important, sensitive issue, and I am glad we can hold this hearing today to ensure that we get it right.

I would like to focus on services for our veterans and families in remote and rural areas. For example, my home district of American Samoa is thousands of miles from the nearest veteran cemetery, and families of these veterans do have options for honoring their fallen loved ones in the form of VA-issued grave markers. This is a very good program. However, I believe it is being underutilized and could benefit from some improvements.

American Samoa is beautiful but small. Small enough that we don't have street addresses for mail to be delivered, and we instead have to rely on P.O. boxes. The VA-issued grave markers can't be delivered to P.O. boxes and need to be delivered to a physical address. As you can see, this presents a problem for my district. Fortunately, our local VSOs and the good folks at our local VA clinic have established a workaround and will help facilitate the delivery by holding the marker at the clinic for pick-up. However, this workaround process is not always immediately apparent to my constituents.

While VA reported to my office that no grave markers have ever failed to be delivered once ordered, I believe the initial confusion on the instructions for a grave marker application regarding P.O. boxes means that not all families are taking advantage of this service. So Under Secretary Reeves, what improvements could the VA make to ensure that families in remote and rural areas who may not have access to a nearby burial option have the ability to honor their deceased loved ones, either with the grave marker program or other initiatives?

Mr. REEVES. Thank you very much for that question. And I understand, having been briefed on this, you know, a little bit ago, is that, in the case of Samoa, that, I believe, is a misinterpretation both on our part, and I am going to take that for action, on what a P.O. box actually means. And in Samoa, I know that, and you can correct me if I am wrong, a P.O. box is actually, in most cases, a physical address. And we are now delivering them based upon the fact that those are actual physical addresses. And we are in the process of clarifying how we need to do that for our workforce also, so that people won't go through that.

Because it says P.O. box, we were interpreting that, I think, as what we would normally see as a P.O. box, you know, centrally lo-

cated P.O. box, you know, like here in the mainland. But that not—that is not really the case, I think there. So I am seeing, the reports that I have gotten is that we have been successfully delivering them to P.O. boxes because they are actually physical addresses. And I think the biggest thing we have got to do is make sure that we clarify that both on the form and that we clarify that for our folks so that there is no misunderstanding.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. BOST. Thank you.

Just so you know, Ms. Esty had to leave, so Mr. Lamb has moved into the chair, so the Marines are now in charge.

Mr. Lamb, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. LAMB. They are going to give us an Army infantry division next, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, thank you for being here. Thank you to Mr. Matz, and Mr. Reeves in particular, for giving us some poetry this morning. I really enjoyed that. And it reminded me of a story about the building of the World War II Memorial here in Washington, D.C. When that was being built, the man who was the overall manager of the construction site stayed in a trailer on the site where they were building the memorial. And he told a story afterward about getting a knock on the door of the trailer after hours one night. And there was an older gentleman on the other side of the door who had driven across the country by himself for two days, from Kansas or someplace like that.

And when he opened the door, the man just handed over his dog tags from World War II. And he told the construction manager, "I just want you to throw those down in the ground underneath one of those big pillars that are going in the World War II Memorial."

And he didn't want anything else. He didn't want his name on a plaque. He didn't want a ceremony or anything special. He just wanted to know that those are going to be down there forever. I think that is consistent with some of the things that you gentlemen said, which is that we owe it to veterans just to let them know that that connection that they have made to each other and to our Nation through their service is never going to be broken and that we are never going to let it be broken. And that is what I took from your comments. And just know that you have a partner here in that effort.

I also think that, with the passage of time, you know, you placed the focus in the right place which was that we need to tell the people of this generation and our future generations about these men and women who came before us and what they did to allow us to still stand on this ground today.

So with that, I am interested in hearing a little bit more, Mr. Reeves, if you don't mind, about the educational program and the mobile app that you talked about. How wildly in use is that right now? Or where are we going timewise with that?

Mr. REEVES. Thank you very much for that question.

And where we are at right now is, as I said, we have nine institutions across the country right now that are doing that. Now, each one of those institutions has multiple, you know, cemeteries that they are actually working with. And it is actually happening right

now in some of our national cemeteries. And what I will do is, just for the sake of time, is I will have my staff provide the full list—

Mr. LAMB. Great.

Mr. REEVES [continued].—and who is doing what and what the program in each area specifically entails, if that would be acceptable.

Mr. LAMB. That would be great, sir. Thank you.

Mr. REEVES. But I would like to say is, as Members of Congress are back in your districts, if you have universities that have history and research components, encourage them to seek out and apply for these Legacy grants so that I can take that to more parts of the country.

I will tell you that the timeline would move, as everything does with the amount of funding that is available for grants, I mean, we have to be realistic about that. But my vision is that there will be at least one, you know, educational affiliate, meaning university or other affiliate, in every State by the time I am done with this.

Mr. LAMB. Excellent.

I am from the 18th District of Pennsylvania, which has the National Cemetery of the Alleghenies there.

Have you had the chance to visit that one yet, Mr. Reeves?

Mr. REEVES. I have not been to the Alleghenies yet. However, one of my colleagues, one of my senior colleagues at the VA actually went and spoke there on Memorial Day, which that is what we do, is we ask our senior folks to go out to all of our cemeteries. And she came back raving about the beauty of the cemetery and the outpouring mainly of the community for that program.

So I am impressed with what they are doing there, and I am impressed that—and glad that you mentioned that, because that is one of the highlighted places that I had.

Mr. LAMB. I am thrilled to hear that.

I am running out of time, so I just want to say, I would like to personally invite you out there. The next chance that you get, I would love to have you there. And I would love to explore ways to expand the educational offerings.

And I think there are some infrastructural needs there as well as with it being a newer cemetery that just came online. So I hope I can work with you on that, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. REEVES. Absolutely. And if I may say, I would ask, please, encourage the schools in your area to apply.

Mr. BOST. If it is all right, with the blessing of the Committee, I got a couple more questions I would still like to ask.

Mr. Avila, your testimony highlighted a new NCA initiative, the pre-need eligibility determination. In your experience, has this program successfully reduced delays and red tape for veterans and their families?

Mr. AVILA. So the pre-need eligibility program, I believe it started several years ago. Veterans can basically file an application. It doesn't guarantee them a slot, but it just eliminates the initial eligibility criteria that NCA has to confirm that a veteran is eligible for interment at National or State cemetery. So by having that done, I think the biggest thing that we see is that the veteran had that conversation with the family, which is a very important con-

versation to have, because most of the time the calls that we receive are when a next-of-kin, the spouse or family member, saying, Look, my father or brother, veteran, or sister is the veteran that passed away. What do we need to do? A lot of it comes to they never had the conversation. Where is the D214 that the NCA is going to need?

So we find this program extremely helpful. We think it does reduce the waiting period. And like I state on my remarks and my testimony, it is not an emergency as far as the waiting. The background sheet that NCA provided for us clearly states kind of what we have been hearing where the wait time is 32 to 45 minutes. And this is for the scheduling, not the official report or the verification.

So if you are able to do the pre-need eligibility determination and already take out the first step, it is going to increase and expedite when this veteran can be interred and buried. So, yes, it is beneficial.

Mr. BOST. Good.

Secretary Matz, what is the status on the restoration of the Clark Veterans Cemetery in the Philippines?

Mr. MATZ. We are making very good headway. As I think I covered this very quickly in my opening remarks, what we have done since we took it over, we are working very closely with Honorable Reeves' agency. They are providing the headstones for us. So we are still doing that. We have done a lot of work in putting paths in and some security, et cetera.

I have not been out there yet myself. That is on my visit list in the next 2 months to get out and visit the Pacific and our superintendent there. But I will tell you, sir, it is coming—I have seen photos of it. It is coming along fine, and we have certainly got the dollars for it right now to do what we need to do.

Mr. BOST. Good.

Mr. MATZ. And, of course, as you know, its sister right there, Manila, which is our largest cemetery of all 26, we are doing a lot of work there in the irrigation systems, and also in putting a new visitor center there. And also in the Clark, we are doing irrigation systems there too.

Mr. BOST. That is good to hear. Thank you.

With that, I want to thank the witnesses again. I would recognize Mr. Lamb as the Ranking Member if he wants to do any closing remarks or—

Mr. LAMB. No, thank you, Mr. Chairman. But thank you for recognizing me.

Mr. BOST. Thank you.

Well, I want to thank the witnesses again for being here today. And as I said earlier, your statements for today's witnesses will be entered into the hearing record.

And I want to close out by saying this: Thank you so much both of you for what you do. And when you say that we need to make sure that our veterans—that their history is not forgotten.

When we were in—we were actually at American Flanders Field. And watching and hearing their Memorial Day services, that they take students from right there that come in and take the names of those veterans and study their history. And on Memorial Day,

students, not from this Nation, from that Nation, because of the liberation that they received by our Americans, they actually study those histories and give testimony about that individual that they had studied that year for that Memorial Day. What an amazing thing. And I think our children should do the same and understand what it is that put forth, not only abroad, but here in the United States with the cemeteries that are there.

But I do want to say this, too, because this is something that stuck—that I have held onto. When you leave the museum or visitors center at Arlington, one of your predecessors has a quote, Mr. Matz, on the wall. That is General Mark Clark. And he was the chairman of the American Battle Monuments Commission from 1969 to 1984. And here is what he says: “If ever proof were needed that we fought for a cause and not for a conquest, it could be found in these cemeteries. Here is our only conquest: All we ask was enough soil in which to bury our gallant dead.” That is hallowed soil. That is hallowed soil. And we need to make sure that that ground, which we do hold with our most gallant men and women, is never ever forsaken. And I thank both of you for doing that.

Mr. MATZ. Absolutely, sir. Thank you.

Mr. REEVES. Thank you, sir

Mr. BOST. With that, I also want to—with unanimous consent, that all Members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks, including extraneous material. Hearing no objection, so ordered.

This hearing is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:27 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Prepared Statement of Randy Reeves

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to be here today to provide the views of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) on the maintenance, construction, and expansion of cemeteries managed by the VA, including VA's plans to provide burial access for eligible Veterans within 75 miles of the Veterans' home. I would also like to provide you with information about other VA memorialization programs, which help demonstrate our Nation's appreciation for the sacrifices made by Veterans and their families. I appreciate the presence of Mr. Matz, representing the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), a strong partner with VA in these same efforts. I defer to him to provide information about ABMC's similar efforts. I am also honored by the presence of our key Veteran service organization partners, who provide such critical support to us and the Veteran community.

First, let me tell you how proud and honored I am to serve America's Veterans and their families as the sixth Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs at the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). NCA is a world-class organization with a long-standing commitment to caring for Veterans and their families in perpetuity at our 135 VA national cemeteries in operation. Every day we have the honor and privilege to fulfill President Lincoln's promise, to care for those who shall have borne the battle.

Earlier this year, I shared my vision with NCA's staff and outlined my priorities as Under Secretary. These priorities are based on my own guiding principles, and align not only with VA's core mission and NCA's Long Range Plan, but also with the subjects of this hearing. As I speak to you today, I will touch on these principles of "Preserving the Legacy," by which I hope we can ensure that "no Veteran ever dies"; of "Providing Access; and Choosing VA" by building on NCA's strategic goal to provide reasonable access to a burial option in a national or VA-funded state or tribal Veteran's cemetery to 95 percent of U.S. Veterans; and finally of "Partnering to Serve Veterans," as shown by NCA's strong history and bright future of working with communities and organizations to raise the national profile and importance of the American civic tradition of honoring Veterans through memorialization.

NCA is dedicated to preserving the memory of our Nation's Veterans. In our 135 national cemeteries, we provide perpetual care for eligible Veterans, Servicemembers, Reservists and family members in 3.6 million gravesites. Our cemeteries include 9,138 developed acres.

One of NCA's strategic goals is to provide reasonable access (access within 75 miles of a Veteran's residence) to a burial option in a national or VA-funded state or tribal Veteran's cemetery to 95 percent of U.S. Veterans. NCA strives to achieve this goal, in part, by establishing new national cemeteries and expanding or replacing existing national cemeteries. We also partner with state and tribal organizations through our Veterans Cemetery Grants Program.

NCA determines the need to open a new national cemetery based on whether 80,000 or more Veterans reside within a 75-mile service area of a proposed cemetery location, and who do not already have reasonable access to burial in a VA national or VA-funded state or tribal Veterans cemetery. Under these criteria, which were approved by Congress in fiscal year (FY) 2011, NCA determined a need to establish five new national cemeteries. In 2015, we opened two of these cemeteries in Florida at Cape Canaveral and Tallahassee. On August 5, 2016, we dedicated Omaha National Cemetery and on May 25th, we dedicated our 136th national cemetery in southern Colorado that will serve over 95,000 Veterans and their families. We anticipate a construction award in this fiscal year for a new national cemetery in western New York.

NCA also recognizes the need to provide new or enhanced burial access in certain rural and urban locations. Under the rural initiative, NCA will establish new national cemeteries in states that do not have an open national cemetery and have

areas where fewer than 25,000 Veterans reside within a 75-mile service area of a proposed cemetery site. These Veterans do not already have reasonable access to a VA national cemetery in another state or a VA-funded state or tribal Veterans cemetery that offers a casketed or cremation first interment option. NCA opened its first rural cemetery at Yellowstone National Cemetery in Montana in 2014. Progress is underway for rural national cemeteries in seven other locations: Twin Falls, Idaho; Fargo, North Dakota; Rhinelander, Wisconsin; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Elko, Nevada; Cedar City, Utah; and Machias, Maine.

NCA's urban initiatives are planned for St. Albans, New York; West Los Angeles, California; Alameda, California; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Chicago, Illinois. At these sites, NCA plans to establish new columbaria-only national cemeteries to enhance service in urban areas where distance and travel time from the center of the city (urban core) to an existing national cemetery present barriers to visitation and contribute to lower usage rates than national cemeteries in other large, urban areas.

NCA also expands existing national cemeteries to maintain current burial access options. We appreciate the recent passage of the Black Hills National Cemetery Boundary Expansion Act, which will allow NCA to obtain land from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) that is adjacent to our existing national cemetery.

Our discussion of final resting places for Veterans would not be complete without including the valuable partnerships we have established with the state and tribal organizations through our Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP). In 2018, we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of the program. VCGP was established in 1978 to complement service provided by VA's national cemeteries. The program assists states, territories and tribal governments in providing gravesites for Veterans in those areas where NCA cannot fully satisfy their burial needs. Grants may be used to establish, expand or improve Veterans cemeteries that are owned and operated by a state, territory or tribal government or to assist the states or tribal communities with issues of operation and maintenance.

VCGP has awarded over \$766 million in grants since 1978, funding 109 state and tribal cemeteries in 47 states, Guam and Saipan, and 11 operational tribal cemeteries. In FY 2017, these cemeteries provided 38,219 burials.

All of these initiatives are designed, as I mentioned, to meet NCA's strategic goal of providing reasonable access to 95 percent of eligible Veterans. We are currently at 92 percent, and when we attain our strategic goal, we know there are others—those that I call the “hardest 5 percent”—who still would be outside our reasonable access standard. We continue to look for ways to reach them as well, and are open to working with you to find innovative approaches to do that.

Of course, NCA leads the way in providing a variety of world class burial and memorial benefits for Veterans and their families. But beyond providing perpetual care in our national cemeteries, NCA is working on several exciting initiatives that will ensure lasting tributes to the sacrifices made by Veterans and their families.

NCA is striving to embrace technology by making significant improvements to our digital landscape to better serve the Veterans and their families. For example, in September 2017, we launched a new NCA mobile site. This mobile redesign has easy-to-understand language, intuitive file paths, a sleek design, and a user-friendly interface. Some of the improvements to the mobile site and to the overall user experience include integration with popular maps; the ability to link to or display a cemetery map; and integration with the new cemetery lookup feature.

Also in 2017, VA inaugurated the Veterans Legacy Program (VLP), a series of unique partnerships between VA and academic institutions, which engage university students to research Veterans' stories, make their stories accessible to the public, and teach K–12 students what they learned about Veterans. While similar in their mission to memorialize Veterans through student engagement, each of the partnerships reflects the unique characteristics of the local communities. VA will expand these partnerships in the future. To date, Legacy programs have engaged 38 university professors and 64 K–12 teachers. The programs have impacted approximately 750 undergraduates and 6,400 K–12 students. Legacy programs have produced 42 lesson plans for K–12 teachers, 119 Veteran biographies, and 6 Veterans cemetery walking tours, all based on research conducted on-site in national cemeteries by students. To maximize programmatic flexibility, the Legacy program is seeking grant authority through an FY 2019 legislative proposal, as grants are Federal award instruments that most universities use. The award and distribution process for grants provides a valuable tool that will allow NCA to manage programs and stakeholders in a more responsive and efficient manner.

The Legacy program partnered with the American Battle Monuments Commission on the Understanding Sacrifice program of teacher education. Teachers from all over the country participated in this program to learn about the Pacific Theater of World War II and to do research on hometown heroes of that war who are interred in NCA

and ABMC cemeteries. ABMC and VLP will continue their partnership in a new program in FY 2018.

VLP and the Library of Congress worked with the Department of the Army to host cadet-interns from the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. They spent their first 3 days in Washington, DC, learning the basics of Veteran research, and then they went to Fort Snelling National Cemetery and Santa Fe National Cemetery, where they worked on researching Veterans in those cemeteries.

Complementing Legacy research and engagement efforts, VA took the first steps of a major transformation of public digital engagement in Veteran memorialization. VA is creating an interactive website, which we expect to be operational in 2019, that will enable virtual memorialization of the millions of Veterans buried at VA national cemeteries. When fully implemented, the platform will allow online visitors to pay their respects and will permit researchers, students, and professionals to share information about more than 3.2 million Veterans memorialized by NCA. Most importantly, it will allow families to upload materials related to a Veteran's service, such as letters, pictures, and videos, to be shared with the public. Visitors to a gravesite will be able to use their smartphones or other devices to "scan" a Veteran's headstone and access the uploaded information, thereby creating an interactive memorial experience.

All of these efforts will help ensure that "no Veteran ever dies." This may seem an odd statement, but let me explain. It has been said that we all die two deaths. The first, a physical one, and the second, the last time someone speaks our name. As Under Secretary, I am dedicated to ensuring that the names of our Veterans laid to rest in our VA national cemeteries, and those Veterans buried in state and tribal Veterans cemeteries around the country, are never forgotten for their service to our Nation. As long as we remember and continue to speak their names and share their stories, they are never truly gone. This is my commitment-and that of all NCA team members-to the families and friends of loved ones now not with us.

This concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. We would be happy now to entertain any questions you or the other members of the Subcommittee may have.

Prepared Statement of Honorable William M. Matz

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the mission, operations and programs of the American Battle Monuments Commission. The subject of this hearing - Honoring Heroes: Memorializing our Nation's Veterans - is so appropriate to our agency mission, and that sentiment inspires the thoughts I share with you this morning.

Since the agency's establishment in 1923, our purpose has not changed - to commemorate the service and achievements of America's armed forces - yet our methods have changed. We execute our mission by creating memorials worldwide where U.S. forces have served, and by maintaining overseas military cemeteries - shrines to our fallen and those that fought by their side - to a standard appropriate to the sacrifice they represent.

Our first Chairman, General John J. Pershing, set the tone for the Commission when he wrote that, "Time will not dim the glory of their deeds." These simple but powerful words are the foundation of everything we do. The cemeteries and memorials we administer have been entrusted to our care by the American people - we take that as a solemn responsibility.

When the President selected me to serve as Secretary of the Commission, he presented me with an opportunity of a lifetime; one I don't take for granted. Preserving these "national treasures" as symbols of selfless devotion and beacons of freedom is not a job; it is a reverent calling, a duty.

Over Memorial Day weekend, we conducted ceremonies in 26 cemeteries, in 10 countries across four continents. On Sunday morning of that weekend, I stood at a podium at Aisne-Marne American Cemetery in France. The Aisne-Marne cemetery and the Belleau Wood battlefield behind it honor those who fell in the Aisne-Marne Campaign. Ten U.S. Army divisions and one U.S. Marine Corps brigade fought alongside French comrades in arms, in America's first major offensive campaign of the war. Memorialized there, shoulder-to-shoulder, are more than 2,600 soldiers and nearly 500 Marines, who died during that campaign with the common goal of making the world safe for democracy and bringing a final peace to Europe.

That Sunday afternoon we were at the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery, where we again offered our thanks and respect to those who served and died in service to our Nation. 6,012 war dead are buried on those beautiful grounds and 241 are listed

as missing - most of whom lost their lives on nearby battlefields. One of the dead is Sergeant Joyce Kilmer, 165th Infantry, 42nd Division - he rests in Plot B, Row 9, Grave 15. Probably best known for writing the poem *Trees*, he also wrote these prophetic words taken from his poem *Rouge Bouquet*:

*THERE IS ON EARTH NO WORTHIER GRAVE
TO HOLD THE BODIES OF THE BRAVE
THAN THIS PLACE OF PAIN AND PRIDE
WHERE THEY NOBLY FOUGHT AND NOBLY DIED.*

Kilmer's poem speaks of life and death. Joyce Kilmer didn't have to put his life on the line. He served as the senior regimental statistician under the direction of the regimental chaplain. But that didn't meet his personal criteria for service to his country. He requested a transfer to the regimental intelligence section, knowing it would get him closer to the front lines. In July 1918, Kilmer's 42nd "Rainbow" Division was attempting to break German defensive positions along the Ourcq River, a few kilometers from the cemetery. In eight days of fighting, the Rainbow Division lost 5,500 men - one of those men was Sergeant Joyce Kilmer.

On Sunday evening, I stood behind a ribbon at the Chateau-Thierry Monument, not far from the Aisne-Marne cemetery, to dedicate a new visitor center that tells the story of men and women like Joyce Kilmer; providing historical context for the events that occurred there 100 years ago; preserving the memory of the thousands of Joyce Kilmer's, whose unselfish willingness to serve a cause greater than them, allows us to live in a world that would be a much different and desirable place than the one we enjoy today.

One Sunday in May - three historic sites of honor and commemoration - underscoring the importance of this morning's theme: Honoring Heroes: Memorializing our Nation's Veterans.

What motivates a man to leave the safety of his trench, to crawl through barbed wire to attack enemy positions with rifle and bayonet when artillery and machine gun fire halts his unit's advance? What motivates someone to ignore their own wounds to care for others, all while under enemy fire? How do we ensure that we never forget such courageous service and sacrifice?

Since the 2007 opening of our Normandy American Cemetery Visitor Center, ABMC has recognized its responsibility to answer those questions by "telling the stories" of the men and women honored at its cemeteries and monuments, providing historical context for visitors now far removed from the events of the war years. Following the world wars, no one had to tell our visitors the story. They were the mothers and fathers, the widows, the brothers and sisters of the war dead. They did not seek nor require context; they knew all too well the story. They came to grieve not to learn, they came to say farewell.

Meticulously maintaining cemeteries and memorials is and will remain ABMC's core mission. But that alone is no longer enough to honor those who served; the Commission must also preserve and communicate their stories of competence, courage, and sacrifice. The visitor center at Chateau-Thierry is the seventh the Commission has opened since 2007. Three more are in development, all with a common purpose - to enrich the visitor's experience and understanding of the importance of these sacred sites, and the significance of the historic events that led to their creation.

We also, over the past several years, have aggressively pursued an educational outreach program in the U.S., through partnerships with universities and organizations like National History Day and the National World War II Museum in New Orleans. I invite you to visit our educational program website at ABMCEducation.org - to view the wealth of stories and lesson plans developed by teachers for teachers. We are updating the World War I materials, and we have begun to partner with the National Cemetery Administration on World War II content, tying the stories of our stateside national cemeteries to those from our overseas commemorative sites.

Through all of this, we have not forgotten our core mission of building monuments to commemorate service and sacrifice. Last year ABMC dedicated its 28th and 29th Federal markers in Dartmouth, England: a granite monument commemorating the Allied build-up, training and launch of the D-Day invasion from the shores of England, and a commemorative bronze plaque in the Britannia Royal Naval College, which served as XI Amphibious Force headquarters in World War II. Later this year, at the invitation of the Government of New Zealand, we expect to dedicate a U.S. memorial in the National War Memorial Park in Wellington. And a monument in Iceland commemorating operations there in World War II is in the early stages of development. When completed, these two commemorations will bring the total number of ABMC memorials, monuments and markers to 31.

Next year, we will commemorate the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings. To prepare for that historic event we are refreshing the exhibits and media at the Normandy visitor center, recognizing that 11 years have passed since the original exhibits opened to the public. And over the next couple of years, we also will improve the cemetery's entrance traffic flow and parking, upgrade and add to existing comfort facilities, and revamp security screening areas to better handle peak visitation periods.

At the Pointe du Hoc Ranger Monument, west of Normandy, we are developing a site master plan to address the challenges posed by the dual need of providing visitors a positive and safe experience while protecting the integrity of this historic cultural landscape. The plan will be completed by the end of this fiscal year, allowing us to define specific actions, timelines and costs for the way ahead. Together, Normandy and Pointe du Hoc are our most visited sites worldwide.

With the support of the Subcommittee, we assumed ownership of the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Cemetery outside Paris in January 2017. The memorial honors American combat aviation pioneers, 49 of whom are interred in the crypt beneath the monument. We will better tell their incredible story next year, when we complete a conversion of an old caretaker's cottage on the site into a small visitor center. We hope to dedicate the new center on Memorial Day 2019.

The memorial cemetery is located in a rustic park environment, which makes impractical the maintenance of a "fine lawn" standard as seen in our cemetery plot areas. Nonetheless, a maintenance and rejuvenation plan has been completed by an arborist specialized in the care of ancient woodlands, who will oversee the execution of the effort to improve the appearance of the grounds while preserving their naturally rustic character. We also have plans to waterproof and repave the memorial terrace, improve the accessibility ramp, and replace paths and curbstones to raise the memorial's condition to ABMC standards.

Finally, I am happy to report that the restoration of Clark Veterans Cemetery in the Philippines is progressing well. We have obligated the \$5 million authorized for the restoration, and are in the final stages of improvements in the plot areas, where the headstones had been partially buried and unreadable since the volcanic eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991. I want to thank the National Cemetery Administration for partnering with us to provide more than 3,000 new headstones to replace those at Clark cemetery that had been damaged beyond repair.

All of these programs and projects have a singular focus, to honor and memorialize America's armed forces - our heroes - for their unselfish and dedicated service and sacrifice.

The poet Archibald MacLeish served as an ambulance driver and later as an artillery officer in World War I. He fought in the Second Battle of the Marne. His brother was killed in action during the war. MacLeish's poem - *The Young Dead Soldiers* - includes this eloquent and timeless challenge:

*THEY SAY, WE WERE YOUNG, WE HAVE DIED,
REMEMBER US .
THEY SAY, WE LEAVE YOU OUR DEATHS:
GIVE THEM THEIR MEANING.*

So many have given us their deaths - it is for us, and our children, for generations to come, to give them meaning. That is and will remain the mission of the American Battle Monuments Commission.

Prepared Statement of Gerardo Avila

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Esty and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs (DAMA); on behalf of National Commander Denise H. Rohan and the 2 million members of The American Legion, the largest patriotic service organization for veterans, serving every man and woman who has worn the uniform for this country, thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) National Cemetery Administration (NCA).

BACKGROUND

NCA's mission is simple: to honor veterans and their families with final resting places in national shrines and with lasting tributes that commemorate their services and sacrifice to our nation. This veteran-centric mission can be traced back to President Abraham Lincoln, who famously stated, "To care for him who shall have borne

the battle and for his widow, and his orphan,” which is now the mission of the entire Department of Veterans Affairs.

On July 17, 1862, President Lincoln signed legislation (Omnibus Act Public Law 165¹) authorizing the President of the United States the power to purchase lands and establish national cemeteries to bury soldiers who died in the service of the country. In 1973 Public Law 93–43 authorized the transfer of 82 national cemeteries from the Department of the Army to the Department of Veterans Affairs, essentially creating and establishing the NCA.

NCA operates 135 national cemeteries, 33 soldiers’ lots, along with monument sites in 40 states and Puerto Rico. Under its current purview, NCA is responsible for perpetuity care of 4.5 million interred veterans, veterans of every war and conflict, and family members. NCA also provides funding to establish, expand, improve and maintain 105 veteran cemeteries in 47 states and territories including tribal trust lands, Guam, and Saipan. For veterans not buried in a VA national cemetery, NCA provides headstones, markers or medallions, to commemorate their service². During fiscal year 2017, NCA conducted over 171,000 interments in National and State cemeteries, provided more than 361,000 headstone and markers, 13,000 bronze medallions, and 670,000 Presidential Memorial Certificates³.

NCA’s SATISFACTION SURVEY

NCA’s yearly customer satisfaction survey consistently receives ranks in the mid-nineties, the results of the latest survey ranked it 99% on cemetery appearance, 96% on quality of service, and 99% of responders say they would recommend it to other veterans⁴. The American Legion has engaged our membership and we regularly hear veterans echo the sentiments found in the NCA yearly satisfaction survey. We frequently receive calls complimenting the level of professionalism displayed by NCA employees when rendering final respects to their loved one, which is undoubtedly during a very difficult and emotional time.

The families often share with The American Legion that NCA is surprisingly well-managed, understanding, and extremely helpful, which is quite contradictory to the expectations they had considering NCA is a division of the Department of Veterans Affairs, the second largest bureaucracy in the federal government. Having a process that is easy to navigate is appreciated by families and veterans.

NCA INITIATIVES

In an effort to provide a higher level of quality service and improve customer satisfaction, NCA has implemented new initiatives and continues its efforts to provide a burial option to veterans within 75 miles from their home. NCA estimates that 92% of all living veterans currently have this option available to them, provided by a national or state cemetery⁵.

Furthermore, 2018 marks the 40th anniversary of the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) which has been instrumental in providing gravesites for veterans in areas that is not supported by NCA or a state cemetery. VCGP is designed to complement NCA’s 135 national cemeteries across the country. It helps states, federally recognized tribal governments or U.S. Territories establish new veterans cemeteries, and expand or improve existing veterans cemeteries. To date, nearly \$800 million has been granted to establish, expand or improve cemeteries to provide a final resting place for veterans and, in certain cases, their families⁶.

There are two NCA initiatives that we have chosen to highlight. They are the Veterans Legacy Program and the Pre-Need Eligibility Determination initiative.

- The Veterans Legacy Program (VLP) is a grant-based partnership with local universities which allows them to conduct genealogy research on veterans buried at NCA cemeteries. One of the goals of the program is to carry the legacy of service and veterans forward by educating the community and the nation of the sacrifice made by these selfless heroes. It is said that we die twice: when we physically take our last breath; and when people don’t remember our names. The Veterans Legacy Program is an important step to ensure that veterans are never forgotten.

¹ Omnibus Act Public Law 165: <https://www.cem.va.gov/ceh/history/timeline/timeline-1862.asp>

² Arlington National Cemetery Report to Congress: <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Portals/0/Docs/Public-Notices/ANC-Capacity-Planning-Congressional-Report-Apr-2017.pdf>

³ 2017 NCA Annual Report: <https://www.cem.va.gov/pdf/NCA—YIR—FY2017.pdf>

⁴ ACSI Report, January 31, 2017: <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USVANCA/bulletins/184ee83>

⁵ NCA FY 2017 Year In Review Report: <https://www.cem.va.gov/pdf/NCA—YIR—FY2017.pdf>

⁶ National Cemetery Administration: <https://www.cem.va.gov/ceh/grants/>

- The Pre-Need Eligibility Determination initiative makes it easier for veterans and their families to plan ahead for difficult situations. The Pre-Need Eligibility Program is helpful in minimizing delays when trying to finalize a veteran's final wishes. Veterans are typically involved in this process, allowing them to dictate and share their desires.

AMERICAN LEGION ENGAGEMENT & RESOLUTIONS

Ensuring veterans receive the postmortem respect they deserve is a priority of The American Legion. In 1962, The American Legion created and established the Graves Registration and Memorial Affairs Committee, now known as the National Cemetery Committee, an internal committee designed to focus on these important issues impacting all veterans. The American Legion maintains a professional staff dedicated to formulate and recommend to our National Executive Committee, through the Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission, policies, plans and programs as they relate to the Department of Veterans Affairs, National Cemetery Administration, and the internment of veterans, active duty servicemembers and their dependents.

In response to issues and concerns, The American Legion created and passed two resolutions at our 2016 National Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio. Through Resolution No. 237, The American Legion supports legislation to amend Code of Federal Regulation 38–632 and specify that VA recognize accredited representatives be authorized to apply for headstone, markers or medallion, in the absence of next-of-kin⁷. This common-sense resolution was created because we have seen a number of cases where a deceased veteran was not able to receive a grave marker or have a replacement issued due to damage, simply because a relative did not make the request. This sometimes happens because there is no next-of-kin available or aware.

The American Legion also created and passed Resolution No. 9, allowing us to support the transfer of land from the Bureau of Land Management to the NCA to expand the Black Hills National Cemetery in South Dakota, to ensure ample land and space for future expansion⁸.

Two weeks ago, on May 25th, President Trump signed legislation transferring approximately 200 acres to expand the cemetery. The passing of this legislation confirms the commitment and obligation we have to honor the memory of those that have served the United States of America in uniform.

CONCERNS

The American Legion is not aware of any obstacles to access for any veteran wishing that their final resting place be a cemetery operated by the NCA. That stated, we do receive inquiries and concerns on two topics: the issuing of NCA headstone or markers for veterans buried in private cemeteries; and wait times when calling the scheduling office in St. Louis, MO.

1. The current policy authorizes NCA to issue a headstone or marker for any unmarked grave. For graves that are marked with a private marker, NCA will provide a headstone or marker for veterans who died on November 1, 1990 to present. Veterans who died prior to this date, can be provided with a medallion to commemorate their veteran status. The American Legion firmly believes there should not be inconsistency or discrepancy between veterans based on era of service, and our members are in favor of having NCA headstones replace the private markers, if the veteran or veteran's family prefers.

2. Shortly after a veteran passes away, it is incumbent of the family to contact NCA and begin the process of burial planning, regardless of the location of the cemetery (private or NCA operated). Coordinating funeral arrangements may be overwhelming and many people, who have gone through the process, have expressed their concerns about the amount of time spent waiting for an NCA representative to speak with them on the phone. Once the family makes contact, the process, as described, is great. The American Legion is concerned with the long wait times family members and veterans are enduring to speak to an NCA representative during this emotional period.

It is our sincere hope that VA, NCA and this committee take a closer look, identify and make the necessary corrections to the discrepancy between veterans who

⁷ Resolution No. 237 Authorization to Apply for a headstone, Marker, or Medallion <https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/5561/2016N237.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁸ Resolution No. 9 Black Hills National Cemetery Expansion <https://archive.legion.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12203/5741/2016N009.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>

are authorized a headstone or marker at private cemeteries and those who are not, and eliminating the wait times at the scheduling office.

CONCLUSION

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Esty, and distinguished members of this veteran-centric committee, The American Legion thanks you for the opportunity to elucidate the position of the 2 million veteran members of this organization.

Ensuring that those who have selflessly raised their right hand in defense of this nation receive the honorable and respectful final resting place they deserve is a priority of The American Legion, and by action of this committee, we can see that it is for you as well.

For additional information regarding this testimony, please contact Mr. Matthew Shuman, Director of The American Legion's Legislative Division at (202) 861-2700 or mshuman@legion.org.

Prepared Statement of Ken Wiseman

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arlington National Cemetery is a national shrine and continues to be a highly active cemetery. The VFW understands recent efforts by the Department of the Army to evaluate ways to ensure Arlington remains an active cemetery for future service members killed in action and Medal of Honor recipients. While the VFW cannot support many of the options being considered to extend the life of Arlington National Cemetery, there are several options to ensure the longevity of this national shrine without severely limiting eligibility. After many meetings with top officials within

the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Department of the Army, as well as surveys and roundtables conducted by ANC, the VFW supports restricting eligibility to veterans who served 24 months of active-duty service. This does not include those killed in action or the dependents of active-duty service members with more than 24 months of service, who must continue to be eligible. Enacting this eligibility restriction would make the in-ground interment policy at ANC commensurate with that of cemeteries within VA's National Cemetery Administration and would reduce workload at ANC by approximately 200 burials per year.

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

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

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

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

Another option is additional support for state cemeteries. Expansion of current cemeteries in the Capitol region and construction of new cemeteries is an option the VFW supports. For example, Virginia operates state veteran cemeteries and is in the process of adding a new cemetery in the northern portion of the state. Actions like this will help solve the problem of needed space for burials.

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

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

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

