

**Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials
April 29 – 30, 2008
West Palm Beach, FL
Minutes**

Committee Members Present:

James Adams	Rose Elizabeth Lee
Les Beavers	Carl Kikerpill
Judy Bissinger	Thomas Lockhart
Stan Brown	Donald Loudner
Bob Cardenas	Joe Martory
Wilfred Ebel	Ben Spadaro
John (Jack) Kelly, Chairman	Judith Young

Committee Members Absent:

Jerry Laws

Ex-Officio Members Present:

Fred Boyles, National Park Service
John W. "Jack" Nicholson, American Battle Monuments Commission
Tom Sole, American Battle Monuments Commission

Ex-Officio Members Absent:

Jack Metzler, Jr., Arlington National Cemetery

National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Attendees:

The Honorable William F. Tuerk, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
Mike Nacincik, Designated Federal Officer, Chief, Communications and Outreach
Support Division
Steve Muro, Director, Office of Field Programs
Frank Kawulich, Director, MSN II
Lindee Lenox, Director, Memorial Programs Service
Kurt Rotar, Director, South Florida VA National Cemetery
Ron Cheich, Program Analyst, Office of Finance and Planning
Robin Cooper, Advisory Committee Program Manager

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

The spring meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials for Fiscal Year 2008 was held in the Royal Princess Meeting Room of the Hilton Palm Beach Airport Hotel at 150 Australian Avenue, West Palm Beach, Florida.

Call to Order and Welcome

Committee Chairman Jack Kelly called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. The Committee members stood and recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

Chairman Kelly then welcomed Administrative Announcements and a Status Report from the previous meeting from Ms. Cooper and Mr. Nacincik.

The Chairman then introduced the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, the Honorable William F. Tuerk.

Remarks by the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs

The Under Secretary began by welcoming the Committee and extending greetings to General "Jack" Nicholson and Wil Ebel as great leaders who set the precedents that NCA is achieving today. Under Secretary Tuerk gave brief previews of updates to come from Steve Muro – including a report on the flood damage at Fort Bliss National Cemetery; Ron Cheich on the American Customer Satisfaction Index survey for 2007; Lindee Lenox on Memorial Programs Service (MPS) and the Veteran's Medallion Workshop; Frank Kawulich on Memorial Service Network (MSN) II; and Kurt Rotar on the South Florida VA National Cemetery.

The Under Secretary then provided information on several items related to the NCA budget. First, in FY08, an unprecedented amount of money was provided to establish, operate, and maintain VA national cemeteries. The added Emergency Contingency requirement of about \$86 million is going to three areas: Operations and Maintenance to contracting in support of accomplishing the National Shrine Commitment; Minor Construction for gravesite expansion and infrastructure improvement; and in support of the states establishing, expanding, or improving state veterans cemeteries. Under Secretary Tuerk went on to say that NCA's 2009 request asks for an 8.5 percent increase over the requested FY 2008 budget. If we receive what we asked for, we will be in good shape. If we exceed our request, we will be in exceptional shape. If all goes as planned, we hope to have a budget enacted on October 1, 2008. In addition, we have asked that Congress establish a \$5 million Land Acquisition Line Item so VA has the flexibility to acquire land quickly when an opportunity presents itself.

A comprehensive review of VA's burial benefits is now under consideration, including the policy to establish new cemeteries within a 75-mile service area with a 170,000 veteran threshold as well as the impact of travel time and geography on access to our cemeteries. The results of a report, expected in the summer of 2008, will be used to assess the need for any policy changes and legislative proposals that define burial benefits.

Next the Under Secretary provided summaries of the six new national cemeteries being developed. The offer to donate property is under review for the Bakersfield VA National Cemetery. We anticipate closure and title transfer by June, 2008. Fast-track construction in the southeast quadrant near the main entrance off of California Highway 223 will begin almost immediately after VA takes title. At Alabama National Cemetery, we have the deed "in-hand". Work will be underway in the Fall. This is a 479-acre site, about 15 miles south of Birmingham, in Montevallo. There is an extreme amount of community support for this project as well as the one at Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina where 600 acres are being transferred from the Department of the Army. The Army has granted a building and land-use permit that will allow VA to start construction of the cemetery as our timeline requires. A construction award this summer by the VA Office of Construction and Facilities Management will allow work on-site to begin almost immediately. VA is purchasing 525 acres from the City of Jacksonville. The Department of Justice is reviewing the Offer-to-Sell. We expect to close in June, when the Office of Construction and Management has targeted a start-date for the fast-track construction. December 2008 could see the first burials. Approximately 16 miles south of Sarasota, we now own a 245-acre site. The dedication ceremony is scheduled for June 1st. Construction will begin in July and, barring foul weather, should be completed by November. First burials may occur as soon as December. In Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia, the title for the Washington Crossing site was transferred to VA on March 27th. The cemetery design should be completed late this year and burials should begin in late 2009. All is clear for a request for proposal for master plan design for the cemetery annex at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar. We plan to begin Fast Track construction in late FY 2009. With that, the Under Secretary concluded his remarks.

Field Operations Update

Mr. Muro discussed in great detail, the rain damage to Fort Bliss National Cemetery, Texas over several months. The first storm brought almost 10" of rain in a 48 hour period. There were 45 days of precipitation from July through September. The heavy, continuous rainfall amounted to 1,200 sunken graves and 1,000 headstones to reset. After a week and a half and 300 hours of overtime, plus 1,000 tons of dirt, repairs were completed just in time for more rain. During August and September the staff set 216 new and replacement headstones and conducted 212 burials while completing massive repairs. Mr. Muro's slides showed clear evidence of the inability of the cemetery to drain the inordinate amount of precipitation. The xeriscaped sections fared well by comparison. High standing water left waterlines on headstones in the section and the Franklin Red gravel had to be replaced, but damage was minimal. The Labor Day weekend storm caused about 1,400 sunken graves due to ground saturation from the previous month. The number of headstones that had to be reset stood at 1,100.

ASCI Results Briefing

Program Analyst Ron Cheich provided information on the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) survey results. The ACSI is an internationally accepted method of measuring customer satisfaction that is used by more than 200 of the largest private companies. Almost all Federal agencies participate. It is sponsored by the Federal Consulting Group and the University of Michigan Business School. ACSI surveyed next of kin satisfaction with: accessibility, clarity, and helpfulness of information; courtesy and professionalism of NCA staff; respectfulness of service provided; and National Shrine status. ACSI measured the level of satisfaction with NCA services and user trust which is the willingness to provide positive comments about NCA and cemeteries and the willingness to rely on VA and NCA to meet burial needs. The results were a score of 95 out of a possible 100 points, which is the highest ever score in ACSI of both the public and private sectors. The average private sector score is 71 points and the average score on government is 68. NCA also participated and was ranked number one in 2001 and 2004. NCA results were regarded as exceptional. The results translate into outstanding customer service by NCA employees; NCA meeting the highest standards for professionalism and compassion; and NCA as an example of how government should provide service.

Medallion Workshop

Background: In 2007 the Committee was briefed on proposed legislation that would give VA authority to provide a "V" device that could be affixed to a privately purchased headstone to designate the grave of a veteran buried in a private cemetery. At that time, the Committee expressed concern that use of a "V" could be misconstrued as meaning Valor rather than Veteran. As a result of the concerns expressed by the Committee, the proposed legislation was revised, and the final language in Public Law 110-157 (signed in December 2007), Section 201(5), states that the VA may: "furnish, upon request, a medallion or other device of a design determined by the Secretary to signify the deceased's status as a veteran, to be attached to a headstone or marker furnished at private expense."

Responsibility for implementation of P.L. 110-157, Section 201(5), including the design and distribution of the new Veteran device, falls within NCA's Memorial Programs Service (MPS). As a first step, the MPS director consulted, and then initiated a contract for professional design services with the Army Institute of Heraldry at Fort Belvoir, Virginia.

Chairman Kelly, Lindee Lenox, director for Memorial Programs Service, and Thomas Casciaro from the Institute, conducted a workshop for the Committee to obtain their ideas and recommendations for the new device. Chairman Kelly began by reminding participants of the issues they had raised concerning the use of a "V" indicating Veteran, and how their input had positively impacted the changes to the legislative language. He also explained that their input at this time was critical, as the final design will serve as a symbol that will recognize veterans for generations to come.

Lindee Lenox provided a briefing on the law, explained that NCA had hired the Institute of Heraldry to develop the design; that they would provide three design options; and that the USMA would provide a recommendation to the SECVA who would make the final decision.

Thomas Casciaro, Chief of the Technical and Production Division, provided an overview of the Institute of Heraldry and briefed participants on the role the Institute will play with regard to the design process. Mr. Casciaro came to the meeting with two medallion designs to use as examples of what this product might look like. He advised participants that the product shouldn't look too much like any one of the insignias that represent a particular branch of the service, but rather should represent all uniformed services by incorporating similarities from insignias for each branch of service. He further indicated the design should be one of "bold simplicity," which means something striking that gets the point across immediately. Mr. Casciaro requested that participants decide on the design elements so that the illustrations, prototype, and then the manufacture of the final product can move forward.

Chairman Kelly and Director Lenox then led the workshop while Mr. Casciaro compiled design themes and ideas from participants. Several ideas were offered, including those brought to the meeting by Mr. Casciaro. They included: seven stars to represent the service branches; land, air, and sea pictured; global coverage; and a folded flag with a banner that reads veteran.

The outcome of the workshop was consensus that the final design should be a distinct symbol with a distinct shape (not round) that is readily identifiable from a distance, and that it must be timeless. It was also agreed a flag should be incorporated into the design – possibly a folded flag; that a distinct symbol meaning "VETERAN" should be included; and that the design should be all encompassing so as to represent veterans from all branches of service. Finally, participants agreed that an eagle or shield design element may be considered as possible design elements.

Fact Sheet Workshop (End of Life Considerations)

Chairman Kelly first asked what the minimum required information is that is needed by VA in order to find a veteran eligible for burial in a VA national cemetery. What information should be included on the checklist that a funeral director would provide to the family? The goal is to have an instrument or vehicle that Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) or other organizations could use as a simple, one page document that makes known the wishes of the veteran and provides everything needed to fulfill his or her wishes to be buried in a VA national cemetery. Certainly the veteran's full, legal name, his or her service number and/or social security number, and the latest DD-214 would have to be included. Les Beavers informed the Committee of the Kentucky law that requires funeral directors to ask if the deceased was a veteran. The Committee members agreed that they would contact the National Conference of State Legislators to urge their consideration of a Model Act for states to adopt that would facilitate this type of notification mandate. Mr. Beavers also said that a system of "pre-eligibility application" was working beautifully as long as everyone understood that it didn't entitle a veteran to a reservation. Steve Muro said that he could provide an update at the next Committee meeting on solutions developed by the NCA leadership class. The Committee declined to further explore this issue.

Discussion on the Role of the Advisory Committee

Chairman Kelly opened the discussion by referencing the formation of the Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials by Congress in 1973 in adopting Public Law 93 - 43. The Committee serves as an advisory body to the Secretary of VA through the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs on issues involving the operations of NCA; the State Cemetery Grants Program; the provisions of headstones and markers, Presidential Memorial Certificates; and related burial benefits. The Committee assists the Secretary in assuring that plans and programs are meeting the needs of our nation's veterans and the eligible family members and meeting the mandate to maintain national cemeteries as national shrines. The Committee is comprised of members of the public with a variety of backgrounds and knowledge sufficient to provide adequate advice and guidance to the Secretary. Committee members are representatives of Veterans organizations, military retirees, and business and community leaders. Appointments for regular members are for one or two years and, in addition, there shall be ex-officio members, one appointed by the American Battle Monuments Commission, the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior, and the Department of the Army's Arlington National Cemetery. The Committee meets twice a year, with one meeting in Washington, DC and the other outside Washington, DC. With that said, Chairman Kelly opened the floor to suggestions of what direction and what goals the members would like to achieve. One of the first questions was, "What responsibility, if any, does the Committee have in making recommendations for site selection?" The current charter from 2007 was referred to and Chairman Kelly quoted the following from Title 38, Section 2401: "There shall be appointed by the Secretary, an Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials. The Secretary shall advise and consult with the Committee from time to time with respect to the administration of the cemeteries for which the Secretary is responsible, and with respect to the selection of cemetery sites, the erection of appropriate memorials, and the adequacy of Federal burial benefits. The Committee shall make periodic reports and recommendations to the Secretary and to Congress." Mr. Kelly reiterated, "The Secretary, and not the Committee, shall advise and consult with respect to the selection of sites." He gave as example of the interpretation that Under Secretary Tuerk, acting as an agent of the Secretary advised and consulted with the Committee on the status of the six cemeteries. Mr. Kelly stated that there are countless other issues for which the Committee is afforded the opportunity to provide advice and consultation. He further offered to host a conference call prior to the next meeting in order that the Committee members can decide on which two issues should be addressed in the workshops.

Memorial Service Network II Overview

Director of MSN II, Frank Kawulich, stated that four of the six new national cemeteries are in MSN II, two in Florida, and one each in Alabama, and South Carolina. Of the total 34 national cemeteries that comprise MSN II, 22 are Civil War era cemeteries, which were established in 1864. In addition to the new cemeteries there are three major construction projects underway. They are at Barrancas, South Florida, and Florida National Cemeteries. At Florida National Cemetery, which is the second busiest of all of the VA national cemeteries, 20,000 pre-placed crypts are being installed which will occupy 80% of the 110 acres given by the state. The remaining land will be used for in-ground cremains. There are eight minor construction projects, most of which are burial expansions. As far as the Millennium Projects are concerned, seven national cemeteries in MSN II have had their headstones raised, realigned, and cleaned and the turf improved to shrine status.

Update on South Florida VA National Cemetery

Kurt Rotar, Director of the South Florida VA National Cemetery, stated that his cemetery is the 125th national cemetery, which opened on April 16, 2007. On that day there were 23 interments, two of which were casket burials and 21 cremations. As of April 29, 2008, there had been 2,439 burials. It is expected that South Florida will have a 50/50 ratio of casket to cremation burials. When the cemetery opened, 57 acres had been developed, 15 of which were for burials: 1,700 traditional burial sites and 3,000 cremation sites. The pre-placed crypts, which are just being completed, will accommodate 4,250 burials. Two sections, 35 and 35A, are for traditional casket burials that were developed in the first phase for burial. Sections 36 and 37 were first developed for cremations. There is a temporary committal shelter and an irrigation system that pumps water from lake #two for water management. The next area of development will host two more committal shelters.

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

The Committee met at 8:15 a.m. and departed for South Florida VA National Cemetery. After entering the cemetery grounds, the Committee was greeted by cemetery Director Kurt Rotar. The cemetery occupies approximately 313 acres. The first phase was 57 acres of developed land for burials. The sections that were reviewed were as previously mentioned. The wreath-laying ceremony at the cemetery flagpole was then conducted. A group photo was also taken.

National Park Service Update

Superintendent of Andersonville National Historic Site of the National Park Service (NPS), Fred Boyles, addressed the Committee on the status of NPS National Cemeteries that are under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior. The NPS is responsible for 79 million acres of land, half of which is in the state of Alaska. They employ 20,000 to maintain and oversee more than 350 parks that welcomed over 300 million visitors in 2007. Of the 14 national cemeteries under NPS, only two are open to new interments. Only two are not tied to the Civil War: Andrew Johnson and Custer National Cemeteries. NPS is outstanding in public education when they are there to meet and greet visitors and provide interpretation about heritage. They also excel in resource management, which at the national cemeteries amounts to the maintenance of monuments. NPS is learning from NCA's example when it comes to headstone raising and realigning. They face recreation versus preservation issues for example when a site is conducting a funeral service and is also hosting a school visit from youngsters who may not observe an attitude of reverence. When asked about the opportunity to provide outreach to VA national cemeteries, Mr. Boyles stated he had already eagerly sought opportunities and distributed brochures. He offered that a link to the NCA homepage might be considered.

American Battle Monuments Commission Update

Tom Sole provided information on the most recent initiatives of the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC). ABMC's mission is, "to honor the service, achievements, and sacrifice of the US Armed Forces where they have served overseas since 1917." Relaying the story to visitors is part of that mission. The World War I overseas cemeteries have infrequent visitors now because most of those that saw combat are deceased. European visitors ask why the Americans have a memorial in foreign lands. As time goes by the story is being lost. The younger generations have only a distant memory of those heroes. General of the Armies John J. Pershing's motto is the promise that, "Time will not dim the glory of their deeds." Unless their deeds and sacrifices are made to come alive to subsequent generations, they *will* fade. Two strategic goals of ABMC are to have the world's best commemorative site and to tell the story. The story of both the cemeteries and the individuals must be told. It is an opportunity and a responsibility.

Committee Business Session

Recap of Recommendations and Endorsements from November 2007 Advisory Committee Meeting in Washington, DC

Recommendation 1: The Committee recommends that NCA consider an outreach program that encourages veterans to pre-register for eligibility for VA veterans' burial benefits.

VA Response: Eligibility for burial in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) national cemeteries and for providing headstones or markers and Presidential Memorial Certificates are made at the time of need. Eligibility determinations are made at the time of the death of a veteran or his or her eligible dependents in accordance with the current statutory and regulatory authority. At the time of need, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is expeditious in responding to family schedules. Currently, about 83 percent of veterans have access to a burial option within 75 miles of their residence. VA's strategic goal is to serve 90 percent of veterans with a burial option at a National Cemetery or State Veterans Cemetery within 75 miles of their residence by Fiscal Year 2010. These burial options are addressed in current NCA outreach materials and programs and a new fact sheet, in development, on *End of Life Considerations* that further address the necessary documents a veteran and their family should have so that eligibility for VA memorial benefits can be made quickly at the time of need.

Recommendation 2: The Committee recommends that NCA develop a fact sheet or brochure on what to do in order to prepare for end of life considerations.

VA Response: VA agrees that a fact sheet on end of life concerns may be helpful to veterans and their families. NCA is developing a new fact sheet on end of life concerns. When it is completed and approved the fact sheet will be available to the public on our Web site at www.cem.va.gov.

Recommendation 3: The Committee recommends that NCA investigate the possibility of developing cooperating associations to allow for retail sales of theme related products to further the support by the public for national cemeteries.

VA Response: Although VA is not interested at this time in pursuing retail sales at VA national cemeteries, we will look into possible products appropriate for sale at our facilities. However, legislation would be required to provide authority for NCA to sponsor or endorse sale of retail items.

Recommendation 4: The Committee recommends that NCA cooperate with individuals or organizations that may want to publish positive, favorable or informative books about NCA.

VA Response: NCA is happy to assist individuals or organizations who want to publish positive books, magazine articles and film products about NCA burial and memorial benefits and facilities. For example, NCA recently provided guidance to Mr. Tom Ruck to help his efforts to publish his book "Sacred Ground: A Tribute to America's Veterans." NCA provides access, as appropriate, to our facilities and information for legitimate and positive projects. However, NCA cannot conduct research for those wishing to publish materials about NCA. NCA's ability to provide support is limited and individual authors are responsible for developing and verifying the accuracy of their content.

New Recommendations:

Recommendation 1: The Advisory Committee requests the opportunity to review and provide comments on the draft VA Burial Benefits Program Evaluation and, if feasible, for the authors to conduct outreach to the committee.

Recommendation 2: The Advisory Committee urges NCA to contact the "Trust for Public Lands" to study strategic opportunities to purchase land for future national cemeteries.

Recommendation 3: The Advisory Committee recommends that NCA develop a Public Service Announcement regarding burial benefits that may be used to highlight memorial benefits where new national cemetery dedication ceremonies are taking place.

Recommendation 4: The Advisory Committee recommends that VA, through an award from the Secretary of VA, acknowledge Worchester Wreath Company for their philanthropic efforts in organizing their Wreaths Across America program. Additionally, the Advisory Committee recommends that all VA national cemeteries support and participate in Wreaths Across America.

The next meeting of the Advisory Committee will be held on Tuesday and Wednesday, November 18th and 19th, 2008 in the greater Washington, DC metropolitan area. The meeting was adjourned.



Michael Nacincik
Designated Federal Officer