

**Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials
June 15 – 16, 2005
St. Louis, Mo.
Minutes**

Committee Members Present:

Jerry Laws, Chairman	John Kelly
James Adams	Carl Kikerpill
Stan Brown	Mylio Kraja
Leo Burke	Thomas Lockhart
Bob Cardenas	Ronald Markarian
Roland Cinciarelli	Joseph Martory
Wilfred Ebel	Ben Spadaro

Ex-Officio Members Present:

Tom Sole, American Battle Monuments Commission

Members Absent:

James Altmeyer

Ex-Officio Members Absent:

Ed Bearss, National Park Service
Jack Metzler, Jr., Arlington National Cemetery

National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Attendees:

The Honorable Richard A. Wannemacher, Jr., Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
Steve Muro, Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
Timothy Boulay, Designated Federal Officer; Chief, Communications and Outreach Support Division
Sharon Ridley, Program Manager, Communications and Outreach Support Division
Robert Morris, Speech Writer, Communications and Outreach Support Division

Wednesday, June 15, 2005

The second meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials for Fiscal Year 2005 was held at the Millennium Hotel's Soulard Room, 200 South 4th Street, St. Louis, Mo.

Call to Order and Welcome

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

Chairman Laws introduced the Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, The Honorable Richard A. Wannemacher, Jr.

Remarks by Acting Under Secretary Wannemacher

Acting Under Secretary Wannemacher shared with the Committee that this meeting was being held in conjunction with the 2005 National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Annual Training Conference. Its focus would be on NCA's future, the challenges, and opportunities that lie ahead, and learning how to best serve an increasing number of veterans while maintaining the highest standards of appearance and customer service at all NCA and State cemeteries.

He also shared that the Committee would be touring and attending classes at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery (JBNC). Additionally, he noted that Jefferson Barracks (the Army's first permanent base west of the Mississippi) was named after Thomas Jefferson, who commissioned the Lewis & Clark Expedition that began in St. Louis. Also, the Acting Under Secretary relayed that JBNC was home to many famous veterans over the years. Some names mentioned were Robert E. Lee, Ulysses Grant, Jefferson Davis, William Sherman, Phillip Sheridan, and Jeb Stuart.

Acting Under Secretary Wannemacher discussed VA's strategic goal of providing burial options to 90 percent of veterans within 75 miles of their residence by the year 2010. Currently, NCA is serving approximately 75 percent of veterans within that 75-mile distance from their home. In the next five years, NCA will be opening 11 new national cemeteries and is also supporting construction of 20 new State veteran cemeteries in communities across the country. He added that approximately 40 individuals from the State veterans cemeteries were attending the conference.

The Acting Under Secretary provided an update on the openings of the newest national cemeteries as follows:

- National Cemetery of the Alleghenies, being constructed just south of Pittsburgh, will conduct its first interments this summer. Alleghenies is on-schedule, despite a legal issue that arose this spring over ownership of some of the acreage at the cemetery. The issue neither stopped nor slowed down the construction.
- Near Detroit, construction is on-schedule at Great Lakes National Cemetery and it will open this summer.
- Georgia National Cemetery (outside of Atlanta) is scheduled to open in November.

Looking beyond this year, NCA has two other planned openings:

- West Palm Beach, Fla., in April 2006.
- Sacramento, Calif., in June 2007.

The Acting Under Secretary briefly added that this week's conference would place strong emphasis on NCA's operational standards and measures and fulfilling the National Shrine Commitment. Most employees attending the conference were supervisors or managers responsible for some or all aspects of cemetery operations. Additionally, he shared that the first 14 graduates of the NCA Training Center were in attendance and completed their program in March 2005. They work in leadership positions at cemeteries across the country.

Lastly, he discussed the fact that 12 of the 15 current Advisory Committee members' terms would expire on August 31, 2005. He sincerely expressed NCA's gratitude for the support and unselfish services rendered by those Committee members during their tenure. He emphasized NCA's continued wish for ongoing support from those members in the future.

National Training Conference Overview

Mr. Steve Muro, Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, provided an overview of the 2005 National NCA Conference agenda. He encouraged Committee members to take advantage of the unique opportunity to view field operations firsthand, to interact with NCA staff, and to explore and ask questions throughout the conference.

The Acting Deputy Under Secretary emphasized that NCA has been working diligently to reduce the number of days after interment for setting headstones or markers, while continuing to improve on the quality of this service. He further added that many NCA employees are nearing retirement eligibility and that the newly hired cemetery directors and young foremen are being properly trained to assume these responsibilities.

Attend 2005 NCA Annual Conference Classes

Committee members were divided into three groups and attended one of the following three classes:

Community Manpower Opportunities - This workshop provided examples of current, successful programs implemented at national cemeteries across the Nation. Multiple discussions ensued on how to initiate these programs, establish operational guidelines, and how to make them successful at NCA facilities. The workshop also reviewed pitfalls that could turn what appears to be a good opportunity into a management or public affairs nightmare.

NCA Inscription Policy and Reporting Contractor Error - This class served as a refresher course on NCA's inscription policy and included real life examples of controversial inscription related issues that arise at NCA cemeteries and a discussion about how to best resolve them. There were many open discussions on what to do when the contractor has made an error or the quality of the inscription is unacceptable.

Headstone and Marker Repair – Lithochroming - The purpose of this class was to demonstrate lithochroming repair of headstones and markers. Lithochroming entails the repair of headstones and markers to make them legible either by re-establishing their dark lettering or replacing the gold leaf lettering on the headstones/markers of Medal of Honor recipients.

Visit to Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery

The Advisory Committee visited JBNC and was provided with a tour by Michael Picerno, Assistant Director at JBNC. Afterwards, Committee members observed demonstrations of developing healthy turf, repairing sunken graves, gravesite layout and opening, closing, and dressing graves.

The meeting adjourned at 4:30 p.m.

Thursday, June 16, 2005

The Committee met at 8:00 a.m. and departed for JBNC.

Second Visit to Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery

The Committee visited JBNC to observe demonstrations of setting, raising, and realigning headstones, setting, raising, and realigning flat markers, and headstone and marker inspection and quality control.

Tour NCA National Training Center

The Committee members arrived at the NCA National Training Center and were greeted by Dr. Trish Rikli and Ms. Sylvia Jackson. Dr. Rikli provided a program overview to include the history of the training center and plans for development of future curricula. Members of the Advisory Committee asked several questions related to current and planned training programs. General Brown asked about the integration of public affairs-related topics in training of cemetery directors. Dr. Rikli shared that the Cemetery Director's syllabus currently includes exposure to media relations, and additional public affairs instruction will be incorporated in the future. After a brief tour of the facility, the group departed for the Millennium Hotel to reconvene for the business meeting.

Committee Business Session

Chairman Laws called the meeting to order at 1:15 p.m.

Recap of Recommendations and Endorsements from November 30 – December 1, 2004 Advisory Committee Meeting in Washington, D.C.

Tim Boulay reviewed recommendations and NCA responses from the November – December 2004 NCA Advisory Committee meeting as follows.

Recommendation 1: The Committee recommends that NCA and VA continue to pursue full funding of the National Shrine Commitment in order to meet their plan to bring national cemeteries up to shrine status.

Response: The funding included in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2005 budget will allow NCA to make steady progress towards improving the appearance of VA's national cemeteries. The 2005 Appropriations Bill, enacted in December 2004, provides \$21 million for cemetery improvement projects. The projects include: raising, realigning, and cleaning headstones and markers; renovating turf in burial sections; and repairing cemetery infrastructure including roads, buildings, irrigation systems, and historic structures. NCA has adopted a comprehensive set of standards for performance in key cemetery operations, which provides guidance and direction for maintaining national cemeteries as national shrines. In addition, in FY 2004, NCA put in place an Organizational Assessment and Improvement Program to ensure accountability for managing results, directing resources to the areas most in need of improvement, and assessing the progress made toward meeting the National Shrine Commitment. Each national cemetery will be evaluated through site visits on a recurring basis. During FY 2004, site visits began at six national cemeteries and plans are in place to expand the number of site visits to 24 national cemeteries in FY 2005.

Recommendation 2: The Committee recommends that NCA explore outreach opportunities to elder care and estate planning organizations.

Response: NCA had already begun to develop initiatives in this area. In FY 2004, NCA exhibited at the American Association of Retired Persons and National Association of Home Care & Hospice national conventions. Further movement along this line will be pursued, in conjunction with comprehensive outreach efforts to traditional audiences in the veteran service organizations and active military areas. In addition, new VA-wide efforts to reach out to faith-based organizations will be pursued.

Recommendation 3: The Committee recommends that NCA proceed with a nation-wide information mailing to every funeral home in the country.

Response: With funding approval, NCA will gain access to funeral home mailing lists and send each an outreach package, including, but not limited to an introductory letter from the Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, an NCA brochure, a map showing

all national and State veterans cemeteries, and a sample Presidential Memorial Certificate (suitable for framing).

Recommendation 4: The Committee recommends that NCA actively investigate and pursue an Internet online headstone/marker application process as an alternative to the traditional hard copy and fax application processes.

Response: NCA initially developed a scanning process to improve the headstone/marker application process. There were several discussions about what technologies should be utilized in this process. There were several critical issues that needed to be addressed and the scanning strategy was designed to quickly remedy those requirements.

The scanning solution, whereby incoming faxes are automatically converted into electronic files which can easily be viewed and manipulated by NCA staff, was implemented as the initial phase of an ongoing project to modernize the headstone/marker application process. Currently, a number of existing constraints limit the scope in which this process can be further automated, and has impacted the ability to provide full Web-based applications. The most notable constraints are:

- Supporting Documentation – Proof of eligibility, usually the DD-214, is required by NCA to accompany the application. At this time, VA does not have online access to older veteran files and a copy of the discharge papers is the quickest way to determine eligibility. This will be true for the foreseeable future, and some records will never be available online.
- Required Signatures – The application requires the signature of the applicant, the person receiving the headstone or marker, and the cemetery official agreeing to allow the headstone or marker to be set.

NCA is, however, moving forward to improve the headstone/marker application process while working within the limitations of the constraints listed above. For example, NCA has an electronic version of the application form (VA 40-1330) available on its Website that can be accessed and completed online. The completed form can then be printed, signed, and forwarded along with supporting documents to NCA for processing.

Recommendation 5: The Committee recommends that NCA develop a supplemental vehicle to the NCA benefits brochure, to assist veterans in preparing their families concerning their VA burial benefits.

Response: This proposal suggests a check-list and document collection device for a range of documents to assist veteran families. For NCA burial benefits, however, applicable discharge documents are the only ones required to determine eligibility. NCA will need to discuss with VA whether or not this supplemental vehicle can be more appropriately handled at the Department level.

Recommendation 6: The Committee recommends that NCA explore the use of non-traditional media outlets (such as the Pentagon Channel, the Military Channel, etc.) to serve as outreach vehicles for NCA information.

Response: NCA is expanding its outreach to non-traditional media outlets and is partnering with VA's Office of Public Affairs (OPA), VHA, and VBA in producing "American Veteran," a new television program about VA and benefits for veterans. "American Veteran" is being broadcast on the Pentagon Channel, and OPA is working to gain a larger broadcast audience through agreements with local television and cable to broadcast the monthly show.

NCA is also working with the Department of the Army to find a major network to produce a documentary on the replacement of the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery. Discovery Network has expressed enthusiastic interest.

Recommendation 7: The Committee wholeheartedly supports the NCA reorganization plan.

Response: NCA's reorganization proposal has been submitted to the Office of Human Resources and Administration. The reorganization plan for two Deputy Under Secretary positions, who will report to the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, is being reviewed. This plan allows NCA to manage both the field and management functions more effectively. A determination on the reorganization proposal is expected to be reviewed by the Secretary in the near future.

Recommendation 8: The Committee commends NCA and the Acting Under Secretary and his staff for their focus and service to veterans and their families.

Response: In December 2004, the American Customer Satisfaction Index gave NCA the highest rating ever measured by the survey, either in the public or private sector.

New Recommendations:

Chairman Laws led the formulation of recommendations. All were approved unanimously. They were:

Recommendation 1: The Committee commends the Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs for the performance of his duties, for providing wise and steadfast counsel and leadership, thereby ensuring effective continuity in the operation of NCA.

Recommendation 2: The Committee endorses NCA's online training efforts and recommends that these efforts be fully implemented and broadened to include certification.

Recommendation 3: The Committee recommends that NCA provide education to newly formed cemetery support organizations and efforts.

Recommendation 4: The Committee recommends that NCA establish relations with the Boy and Girl Scouts of America and similar youth organizations to support the commemoration of VA's 75th Anniversary.

Recommendation 5: The Committee endorses and commends NCA efforts to support the establishment of State veterans cemeteries as a means of increasing service to veterans in lesser populated areas.

Recommendation 6: The Committee encourages State cemeteries to attain and be awarded national shrine status.

New Business

Chairman Laws asked the Committee to provide input on the theme for the first meeting in fiscal year 2006. The Committee unanimously agreed that the theme for the next meeting would be "Support and Establishment of New Cemeteries." The exact date will be announced at a later time. Members stood for a moment of devotion. Chairman Laws adjourned the meeting at 3:15 p.m.

Timothy Michael Boulay
Designated Federal Officer

Jerry Laws
Chairman