

Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials
April 28 – 29, 2010
Houston, TX
Minutes

Committee Members Present:

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| James Adams | Rose Elizabeth Lee |
| Les Beavers | Carl Kikerpill |
| Stan Brown | Thomas Lockhart |
| Wilfred Ebel | Donald Loudner |
| John (Jack) Kelly, Chairman | |

Committee Members Absent:

Joe Martory
Al McMichael

Ex-Officio Members Present:

Brad Bennett, National Park Service
Jack Metzler, Jr., Arlington National Cemetery
Tom Sole, American Battle Monuments Commission

Department of Veterans Affairs Attendees:

OPA Regional Director (Region 7/Dallas), Ozzie Garza

National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Attendees:

Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Steve Muro
Director, Communications Management Service, David Schettler
Acting Director of Memorial Programs Service, Don Murphy
Director, Memorial Service Network III, Johnathan Reiker
Director, Houston National Cemetery, Arleen Ocasio
Former Director, Houston National Cemetery, Jorge Lopez
Designated Federal Officer, Chief, Communications and Outreach Support Division,
Mike Nacincik
Advisory Committee Program Manager, Robin Cooper

Representatives from Veterans Service Organizations

Carmen Gonzalez, Disabled American Veterans (Chapter 9)
Arch Ethun, Veterans of Foreign Wars 8790

Wednesday, April 28, 2010

The spring meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials for FY 2010 was held in Hardin (Rooms A & B) of the Houston Airport Marriott, Houston, TX.

Call to Order, Welcome, and Pledge of Allegiance

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 Mr. Nacincik and Ms. Cooper.

The Chairman then introduced the Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Steve Muro.

Remarks by the Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs

The Acting Under Secretary began by saying that the Secretary has challenged VA to transform itself into a 21st century organization by becoming Veteran centric, results driven and forward looking. NCA is, in many ways, leading VA in these efforts and helping the Secretary to reach these goals. As for being Veteran centric, NCA is focused on Veterans and their families; providing memorial benefits that are respectful, dignified, and courteous while maintaining our cemeteries as national shrines. Our annual customer satisfaction surveys as well as the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) scores verify this. The scores help identify trends to maintain what has been achieved and to show areas for improvement. In this way, NCA is results driven. In addition, MPS recently conducted its first survey on services to Veterans buried in private cemeteries. The contractor concluded from the scores (which were similar to NCA's customer satisfaction survey and the ACSI) that "Overall, next of kin (91%) and funeral directors (94%) are satisfied with their experience." NCA demonstrates it is forward looking through new innovations and practices to increase efficiency and customer service in delivering not just memorial benefits but also VA benefits as a part of the larger VA team. For example, the new medallion benefit, which the members of the Advisory Committee helped design, will soon be available. Also, NCA is recognizing and reacting to the growing trend of cremation burials, looking at green initiatives to lower our impact on the environment and proceeding with the new urban cemetery initiatives to serve Veteran populations.

With regard to the FY 2011 budget, it supports the implementation of establishing a new Veteran population threshold of 80,000 Veterans within 75-miles of a location for determining the location of a new national cemetery. As a result of this change NCA will be looking to build new national cemeteries in the areas of: South Central Colorado,

Eastern Nebraska, Northwestern New York, the central panhandle of Florida, and East Central Florida.

NCA is also looking at developing an "Urban Initiative" which will be relatively small tracts of land or even existing buildings near or within major urban core areas for the establishment of columbaria facilities. Cities planned for development are: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York.

The NCA national training conference this year is June 22 – 24 in Los Angeles. The primary attendees will be cemetery directors. Service Directors from VACO are also attending.

Mike Nacincik mentioned new Advisory Committee member Sergeant Major (retired) Al McMichael and recommended appointee Command Sergeant Major (retired) Jack Tilley. Al is a former Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps and Jack is a retired Sergeant Major of the Army.

Award Presentation

Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Steve Muro had the distinct pleasure of honoring former Director of Houston National Cemetery, Jorge Lopez with an award to commemorate his years of dedicated service to NCA. Mr. Lopez was instrumental in bringing the Houston National Cemetery to shrine status.

Remarks

Memorial Service Network (MSN) III Director Jonathan Reiker addressed the Committee members next. MSN III consists of 19 national cemeteries: 14 open, 2 open to cremains only, and 3 open to second interments only. There were 19,035 interments in MSN III in FY09 (11,895 caskets and 7,140 cremains). Two hundred thirty-four FTEs in the MSN cared for 442,353 gravesites on 2,610 acres. Four of NCA's busiest cemeteries are in MSN III. They are: Fort Logan, Denver, CO; Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, TX; Dallas/Fort Worth, TX; and Houston, TX. There are four sites of current major projects in MSN III. They are at: Dallas/Fort Worth; Fort Sam Houston; Leavenworth; and Houston. Millennium and stimulus projects in the MSN cover 71,187 headstones and markers and turf renovation of 123 acres. Cemetery staff attended, trained, and presented at 233 outreach events; reaching more than 33,000 attendees.

Remarks

Director of the Houston National Cemetery, Arleen Ocasio provided comments after the presentation by the MSN III Director. She began by providing some general information about the cemetery. Houston National Cemetery was established on 7 December 1964. Approximately 500,000 Veterans are served in Houston and adjacent areas of Texas. There are approximately 10-15 interments daily during the week, which amounts to

2,700 burials conducted annually. At present, there are 8,861 burial sites available at the cemetery. As of April 9, 2010, there are: 5,875 crypts; 2,986 traditional sites; 2,615 columbarium niches; and 227 in-ground cremation sites. There are three Medal of Honor recipients interred at the Houston National Cemetery.

The Houston National Cemetery personnel is committed to meeting the NCA National Shrine Standards in the key cemetery operational areas of interments, grounds maintenance, headstones, markers, niche covers, equipment maintenance, and facilities maintenance. Through daily operations, personnel pledge to serve with honor and respect.

The cemetery partners with the VA Medical Center and regional office and works in conjunction with other resources to insure excellent delivery of services, in meeting the standards of customer service. Other partnerships include: the National Cemetery Council of Greater Houston, Inc.; Veterans of Foreign Wars (district 4); the National Memorial Ladies; Korean War Veterans; Local Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts; and Community Service Restitution Program (Harris County).

Director Ocasio then proceeded to show many before and after photographs of improvements underway at the cemetery.

Communications & Social Media Update

Communications Management Service Director David Schettler presented the update for the Committee. He began by saying that the NCA communications staff is the principal public affairs advisor to the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. He outlined the number of FTEs and their functions in the Communications and Outreach Support Division. Mr. Schettler gave reference to the NCA Public Affairs Handbook, which covers NCA public affairs roles, responsibilities, and standard operating procedures. The communications "tool bag" consists of: news releases, media advisories, fact sheets, backgrounders, biographies, press conferences, interviews, features, speeches, internet/web sites, social media, Public Service Announcements, special events and ceremonies, photo opportunities, and more.

NCA uses a multi-tiered approach to outreach initiatives to inform Veterans of VA memorial benefits. These approaches include: participation in national Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) conventions, professional, and other conventions and conferences; participation in local outreach events by MSN and cemetery staffs; maintaining an informative website; engaging Veterans and the public using social media platforms; participating in ceremonies and special events; and wide distribution of brochures, fact sheets, promotional items, and the "Sacred Trust" dvd.

NCA national and local outreach events have grown from 10 national and 1,581 local events reaching 203,085 attendees in FY07 to 30 national and 2,762 local events reaching 468,948 attendees in FY09. NCA is expected to exceed those statistics by far in FY10.

VA/NCA Public Affairs is widely advertising the new medallion option. There are national news releases, Vanguard articles, it has been republished in VSO magazines and is being used as a vehicle to promote *all* memorial benefits. The new and improved NCA National Brochure will match the folder design, individual cemetery brochures will change to match the brochure and the medallion benefit has been added.

Mike Nacincik took the reigns to discuss social media and outreach. Media is changing the world as we know it. Barriers to entry into the publishing world are gone. The citizen journalist is on the rise, as is participatory journalism and consumers of news are now the creators of news. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter are increasingly popular.

Outreach Workshop

Chairman Kelly opened the outreach workshop by asking Committee members to identify who is currently being reached by traditional methods. VSO members, active duty servicemen, benefit recipients, hospitalized Veterans, funeral referrals, next-of-kin, civic organizations, elected officials, and those contacted through national funeral directors associations such as the International Cemetery, Cremation, and Funeral Association (ICCF) and the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), are some of those already being reached. The challenge then becomes how to reach a much broader audience by traditional and non-traditional means, including the education of those making decisions in the wake of the passing of a Veteran family member.

The Committee members heard some of the non-traditional, newer technology approaches for outreach to a younger Veteran population during the Communications and Social Media Update by David Schettler and Mike Nacincik.

The members also identified those in need of information at hospice care, elder facilities, private and state facilities, state Veterans nursing homes, retirees, and perhaps most importantly, those making the decisions in the aftermath of the Veteran's death. In addition, the members explored the layer of education of the decision-maker. Opportunities to reach Veterans and decision-makers with information on burial options and benefits include: annual social security statements, Congressional mailings, issuance of the DD-214 or DD-1300, tax forms from the Internal Revenue Service, driver's licenses (might include a box identifying driver as a Veteran), lawyers, insurance companies, clergy, social workers, benefit providers, and service providers (such as the local barber shop). The use of a public service announcement or brief and repetitive messages during high volume programming (such as the Super Bowl) were suggested also.

Remarks

OPA Regional Director Ozzie Garza addressed the Committee next. Director Garza greeted the Committee and expressed appreciation for their efforts. He said that the primary role of public affairs is outreach – reaching all Veterans and their families. He reiterated the desire of the Secretary to transform VA into a 21st century organization, using new technologies and increasing outreach efforts especially to our newest Veterans (OEF/OIF) returning home.

Director Garza next spoke about the high visibility of the national cemeteries especially at events like Memorial Day, which provides an opportunity to showcase and highlight the work done at VA national shrines.

On occasion national cemeteries are approached with requests to involve media or filming on location. An example was the story of an Army Veteran that received full military honors one year after no one stepped forward to claim his remains. Other examples that receive wide media coverage are stories about homeless or indigent Veterans who receive dignified burial services under the Dignity Memorial Homeless Veterans Burial Program. National cemeteries also respect family requests not to have large media presence at services. Cemeteries get numerous requests to use locations as backdrops for movies and documentaries. There are positive stories surrounding the cemeteries like Wreaths Across America and Avenues of Flags as well as controversial issues like water-wise landscaping and wiccans requesting that their symbol be placed on grave markers and headstones in national cemeteries. As VA public affairs officers, it is our responsibility to look beyond the headlines to see how a major news story will impact VA.

Director Garza concluded by saying that caring for those who fought our wars is a never-ending obligation – that each national cemetery is a hallowed place of honor for those who served our Nation with honor. He again thanked the Committee members for their work, time, and commitment.

Memorial Programs Service Update

Acting Director of Memorial Programs Service (MPS) Don Murphy provided an update on the headstone and marker program. He began by citing some general statistics from FY09. Over 352,000 headstones and markers were ordered. More than 655,750 Presidential Memorial Certificates were issued.

As far as the progress of the medallion option is concerned, the VA Secretary approved the medallion design on January 13, 2010. The contract solicitation was posted on 31 March and closed on 23 April. NCA will issue a news release after the contract to produce the medallion has been awarded. The VA/NCA website reflects the latest medallion information including photographs and the availability date. The application form is finalized. NCA is preparing materials to assist staff with medallion outreach. It is estimated the medallions will be available to the public by the end of June.

The First Notice of Death (FNOD) Program was established in June 2008. FNODs result from: burial in a national cemetery, submitting an application for a government-furnished headstone or marker, or an application for a burial flag. One year later FNOD moved into its own space with a staff of 15 employees processing FNODs from Western, Central, and Southern Area Offices. In September transfer of the final Regional Area (Eastern Area Region) took place. The current monthly workload is approximately 15,000 – 18,000 NCA-generated FNODs. There are between 30,000 and 34,000 flag applications received monthly. And 5,000 to 7,000 FNODs are received monthly from Prudential and Philadelphia Insurance claims. As of March 30, 2010 the FNOD office has: terminated \$33.5 million dollars in benefits; received 717,560 Notices of Death; processed 714,902 FNODs; terminated running awards on 28,842 Veterans. Acting Director Murphy provided contact information and closed his presentation.

Thursday, April 29, 2010

The Committee departed the hotel early morning for Houston National Cemetery. MSN III Director Jonathan Reiker and Director Arleen Ocasio as well as VSO Representative Arch Ethun, greeted the group upon arrival. A meet and greet followed with cemetery staff, including foreman Aubrey "Bud" David who conducted the bus tour of the grounds that were punctuated with freshwater ponds and abundant plant life. The cemetery was pristinely maintained, boasting over 70,452 interments and ranking 11 in interment workload at the end of FY08. The Committee toured the shrine status grounds and conducted a wreath laying ceremony at the Hemicycle. The Hemicycle is a unique circular structure that has a chapel with a 75-foot bell tower at the center of two sweeping arcs used for ceremonies and celebrations such as Memorial Day and Veterans Day events. The chapel, one of only four throughout the VA national cemeteries, featured six beautiful stained glass windows that shone like a kaleidoscope on the white marble walls. AMVETS donated the carillon bells.

Oral Public Comment

No comments from any public attendees.

National Park Service Update

Superintendent of Anderson National Historic Site Brad Bennett presented the National Park Service (NPS) update. There are 14 national cemeteries maintained by the NPS, each being within a battleground or historic site. Last November NPS was proactively responding to the concerns expressed by Senator Boyer of Indiana with regard to the standards of care for the 14 cemeteries. The report is being reviewed to be finalized by the Secretary of the Department of the Interior. One of the recommendations was to have a meeting with all of the cemeteries represented. In December of 2009, NPS held their first ever National Cemetery Summit. Out of the summit, the following management issues and best practices were addressed: headstone alignment, headstone cleaning, turf management, community engagement, and historic

headstones. Policy guidance will next result in a Directors Order and then a reference manual.

At an October meeting in Nashville, a lot was discussed in terms of headstone preservation and what is potentially damaging when cleaning with solutions. How an historic headstone is defined was also discussed. It is the information on the headstone that honors and identifies the Veteran and not the stone material that is historic. Many Civil War headstones are not original, they are replacements and still considered historic.

At Andersonville a gentler alternative to bleach is being used to clean the headstones. Also, no weed or grass herbicides are being used around headstones for appearances sake. The chemicals would "wick up" into the headstones causing damage. They have resumed use of weed trimmers around the base of the stones. They will look great for some upcoming events such as: Echo Taps on May 15, 2010 (Armed Forces Day) and Memorial Day service on May 30, 2010.

Arlington National Cemetery Update

Superintendent Jack Metzler provided an update on Arlington National Cemetery (ANC). In FY09 there were a total of 6,904 funerals. Of those, 2,446 were casketed and 1,571 were cremations for a total of 4,117 ground burials. There were 2,842 columbarium inurnments. Of the total number of funerals, 65% were cremations. Four sections of the columbaria wall are filled.

Monies received in FY10 amounted to \$38 million. The greatest expense was contracting out (\$17,522), followed by new construction (land and structures \$12,137), and then salary for employees (\$8,446).

Like Houston National Cemetery, there is a hemicycle structure at ANC. It now houses the Women in Military Service for America Memorial. Arlington National Cemetery also has two amphitheaters which are used for events such as those in celebration of Memorial and Veteran's Day.

Soldiers who die as a result of wounds received in action may receive Full Honors (caisson, band, marching troops, bugler, firing squad, chaplain, etc.) if the family so requests. The Air Force, Navy, and US Marine Corps have all agreed to support the new policy of the Secretary of the Army so all branches of service are in unison.

The columbaria niche covers at ANC are a thicker marble (versus granite at many VA national cemeteries). Both the rosettes and bolts must be iron-free or unsightly rust stains will appear on the covers within about one year. Any artificial contents of a niche (flags, stuffed toys, prayers, cardboard containers, etc.) is potentially damaging because the breakdown of material composition will cause bleeding to occur, discoloring the marble.

What does the future hold for ANC? A millennium project is currently underway that will see columbaria built into the hillsides, a new committal shelter, an assembly area, and a new entrance into the cemetery. The first phase of construction has been completed. The additional land will extend available burial grounds and columbaria into 2045. An approximate 36 acres in additional land from the Navy Annex in 2012 will take them into 2060.

American Battle Monuments Commission Update

Director of Engineering and Maintenance Tom Sole provided the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) update. Under new leadership, ABMC has undergone a complete reorganization. Until a year ago ABMC consisted of a central headquarters, a European Region (17 cemeteries), a Mediterranean Region (4 cemeteries), and separates (3 cemeteries). The new structure is a thematic reorganization. Now everything overseas falls under the Director of Overseas Operations at the Paris office. The cemeteries are divided into World War I (8 cemeteries), World War II North (8 cemeteries), World War II Pacific and Others (3 cemeteries), and World War II South (6 cemeteries). The thematic reorganization is more in keeping with the interpretive program.

The first interpretive program site, the new visitor's building at Normandy, has been operating for about two years. The new initiative generated about \$4 million in additional funding from OMB and Congress to fund the interpretive program at ABMC. There are two projects at Pointe du Hoc: the cliff stabilization project and also the exhibit design. Both are underway. Because England is the site of the 2012 Olympics, the Cambridge facility and exhibit design projects have also been initiated in anticipation of receiving the public. The Sicily-Rome project will kick-off in September 2010. The 100th anniversary of World War I will coincide with the Meuse-Argonne kick-off in March 2011 and the Aisne-Marne kick-off in September 2011.

ABMC differs from NCA outreach in that NCA is concerned with making Veterans and their families aware of their burial benefits whereas ABMC reaches out to Americans and other visitors to come to a site and hear their stories. Cruise lines now have routine stops in North Africa, Rhone, and Flanders Field. ABMC interfaces with student groups such as the Student Ambassador Program. There is increased interest from military groups in Europe to participate in commemorative events. The largest number of visitors will be the virtual visitors and a test case Normandy web cam is targeted for July.

Lastly, Director Sole mentioned the ABMC/NCA interface at Honolulu at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific because of the memorial there. The projects currently scheduled for funding are the inclusion of handicap accessibility and installation of Vietnam Campaign Battle Maps.

Committee Business Session

Old Business

The minutes from the fall meeting were approved.

Recap of Recommendations and Endorsements from November 2009 Advisory Committee Meeting in Washington, DC

Recommendation 1: That NCA establish a national shrine certification process with ABMC, Arlington National Cemetery, the National Park Service, and state veterans cemeteries in conjunction with NCA's triennial reviews. That upon validation of achieving national shrine status NCA will award an appropriate certificate or plaque and that such status be reviewed on a triennial basis.

VA Response: We look forward to working with all national and State cemeteries that adopt NCA's Operational Standards and Measures as the vehicle through which to achieve and maintain national shrine status. VA already has national shrine certification processes in place for VA national cemeteries and State Veterans cemeteries funded through VA's State Cemetery Grants program. VA will develop a national shrine certificate and upon meeting VA's national shrine standards, NCA will present that cemetery with a certificate. We are currently initiating contact with the National Park Service (NPS) to form a partnership to establish equivalent national shrine standards in NPS national cemeteries. This partnership may also include Arlington National Cemetery. When national shrine standards are established and accepted, NPS can certify its cemeteries and provide appropriate recognition to those cemeteries that obtain national shrine standard.

Recommendation 2: The committee endorses and supports the 21st century initiatives presented by VA Chief of Staff John Gingrich during the meeting.

VA Response: VA appreciates the Committee's support of our transformation initiatives. VA looks forward to the Committee's continued support and help in reaching future goals.

Recommendation 3: The committee endorses Memorial Program Service's design for the bronze medallion presented to the committee and recommends that this medallion be adopted by the Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs for recommendation to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

VA Response: The medallion design recommendation was approved by the Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs and referred to the Secretary of VA for a decision. The Secretary has approved the medallion design recommendation. Next, NCA will solicit a contract to produce the medallions and conduct outreach to inform Veterans and other stakeholders about the new benefit. We anticipate that the new medallion benefit will be available in the summer of 2010.

VA Response: VA appreciates the Committee's endorsement of NCA's lithochrome policy. This policy was adopted to ensure that headstones and inscribed niche covers have a consistent appearance, regardless of their age or location. The policy was put into place precisely to maintain a consistent National Shrine appearance, both in older burial sections, as well as in new burial sections.

New Business

No new business issues were raised to discuss.

New Recommendations

The following recommendations were motioned and seconded.

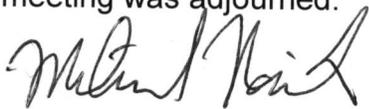
Recommendation 1: That NCA develop a simple outreach theme e.g. "Veterans and their spouses are entitled burial in a national cemetery.

Recommendation 2: VA should use paid advertising of NCA's theme.

Recommendation 3: That VA ask national corporate funeral directors such as SCI and other major companies to incorporate in their contracts that they will have a provision asking customers if the deceased was a Veteran or spouse of a Veteran and if so will inform them that they are entitled to burial in a VA national or State Veterans cemetery.

Recommendation 4: NCA should expand their outreach through increased funding beyond traditional programs.

The fall meeting of the Advisory Committee will be held in Washington, DC. The tentative meeting dates are Wednesday and Thursday, December 1 – 2, 2010. The meeting was adjourned.



Michael Nacincik
Designated Federal Officer