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NATIONAL
HEADQUARTERS
4647 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland
20706-4380
TELEPHONE: 301-459-9600
FAX: 301-459-7924
E-MAIL: amvets@amvets.org

TESTIMONY

of

RICHARD “RICK” JONES

AMVETS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

presented to the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS’ AFFAIRS

Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

regarding:

Policy and Operational Issues Facing the Department of

Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration

Wednesday, April 20, 2005,

10:00 A.M., Room 334

Cannon House Office Building

MR. CHAIRMAN, RANKING MEMBER, AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as part of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs oversight hearing on the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). My name is Richard Jones, AMVETS National Legislative Director.

As you know, AMVETS is a congressionally chartered veterans service organization and a leader since 1944 in helping to preserve the freedoms secured by America's Armed Forces. Today, our organization continues its proud tradition, providing not only support for veterans, their families and those on active duty but also an array of community services that enhance the quality of life for this nation's citizens.

The National Cemetery Administration is responsible for five primary missions: one, to inter, upon request, the remains of eligible veterans and family members and to permanently maintain gravesites; two, to mark graves of eligible persons in national, state or private cemeteries upon appropriate application; three, to administer the state grant program in the establishment, expansion or improvement of state veterans' cemeteries; four, to award a presidential certificate and furnish a United States flag to deceased veterans; and five, to maintain national cemeteries as national shrines sacred to the honor and memory of those interred or memorialized.

As the veterans population ages, demand for NCA services will remain high. In recent years, the NCA burial rate has begun to average more than 100,000 interments per year. According to Department of Veterans Affairs projections, annual individual burials will peak in 2008. Clearly, NCA resources must keep pace in order to meet the growing workload of increasing demands of interments, gravesite maintenance, cemetery repairs, general upkeep, and related labor-intensive requirements of cemetery operations.

NCA also faces a challenge of completing a work schedule that attends to the repair and renovation needs of more than 900 projects identified in *Volume 2 of the Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries*, a review of current and future burial needs submitted to Congress in 2001. According to the study, these project recommendations, which have an estimated cost of \$279 million, recognize existing, deteriorating conditions at individual cemeteries in the NCA portfolio.

If the National Cemetery Administration is to continue its commitment to ensure national cemeteries remain dignified and respectful settings that honor deceased veterans and give evidence of the nation's

gratitude for their military service, there must be a comprehensive effort to greatly improve the condition, function, and appearance of the national cemeteries.

AMVETS strongly supports the full Committee's recommendation that Congress establish a five-year, \$250 million program to restore and improve the condition and character of NCA cemeteries as part of this year's operations budget.

In fiscal year 2004, the Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration (NCA) maintained more than 2.6 million gravesites in approximately 14,000 acres of cemetery land and provided interments to nearly 100,000 individuals. The NCA management responsibilities include 120 cemeteries: of these, 60 have available, unassigned gravesites for burial of both casketed and cremated remains; 26 allow only cremated remains; and 34 are closed to new interments.

In addition, the NCA burial program calls for activation of six new cemeteries in the areas of Detroit, Michigan; Sacramento, California; Ft. Sill, Oklahoma; Miami, Florida; Atlanta, Georgia; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "Fast track" burials, which allow interment in a designated section of a cemetery prior to final completion of all construction activities, are already available in Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Florida and planned for Michigan and Georgia in 2005. Construction funding is planned for California in the fiscal year 2005 budget.

Moreover, the fiscal year 2005 budget contains advanced planning funds for site selection and preliminary activities to serve veterans in six new national cemeteries: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Birmingham, Alabama; Jacksonville, Florida; Bakersfield, California; Greenville, South Carolina; and Sarasota, Florida.

With the opening of these new national cemeteries and state veterans cemeteries over the next four years, the percentage of veterans served by burial option within 75 miles of their residence will rise to 83 percent in 2005 from a level of 73 percent in 2001. The completion of these new cemeteries will represent an 85 percent expansion of the number of gravesites available in the national cemetery system since 2001, almost doubling the number of gravesites during this period.

Expanding cemetery capacity is coincident with projections of expanding numbers of veteran deaths and interments performed by the NCA. With the aging of World War II and Korean War veterans, nearly 655,000 veteran deaths are estimated in 2005 with the death rate increasing annually and peaking at

676,000 in 2009. It is expected that one of every six of these veterans will request burial in a national cemetery.

As the volume and intensity of cemetery operations increase, NCA staffing needs become more critical. While AMVETS supports efforts to increase efficiency of operations, it is essential to remember that much of NCA work is labor-intensive, requiring a fully staffed and fully equipped workforce.

In addition to NCA staffing requirements, the visual appearance of national cemeteries as shrines is another NCA high priority. Many individual cemeteries are steeped in history, and the monuments, markers, grounds, and related memorial tributes represent the very foundation of our country. With this understanding, the national cemetery system represents a unique treasure that deserves to be protected and nurtured.

Unfortunately, despite NCA continued high standards of service and despite a true need to protect and nurture this national treasure, the system continues to face a serious challenge in improving the appearance of cemetery assets.

In 2001 and as directed in the Millennium Act, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs issued the results of the required report entitled *Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries* in three separate volumes:

- Volume 1: Future Burial Needs
- Volume 2: National Shrine Commitment – Facility Condition Assessment
- Volume 3: Cemetery Standards of Appearance

It is our view that the *Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries* adequately addresses what we believe to be the National Cemetery Administration's two major challenges: First, to provide for the passing of the generation of men and women that defended freedom and democracy in World War II and Korea; and Second, to ensure the maintenance of current cemeteries and the continued planning, design, and construction of world-class, quality cemeteries to honor veterans and their families into the future.

Volume 1: Future Burial Needs reports that 31 additional veterans cemeteries will be required over the next 20 years in order to provide 90 percent of veterans with a burial option in a veterans cemetery. According to the report, current and planned cemeteries under the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) fiscal year 2000 strategic plan, which runs through 2006, will service most large population centers. However, to reach the 90 percent level, the report states that an additional 18 cemeteries would need to be added.

Clearly, the rapid aging of the current veteran population has placed great demands on NCA operations and currently available burial space. Primarily because of the passing of the World War II veterans and eligible family members, the VA interment rate is projected to increase significantly over the next several years, peaking at nearly 108,000 in fiscal year 2008. As veteran deaths accelerate, the demand for veterans' burial benefits will increase.

Volume 1: Future Burial Needs concludes with three important recommendations to achieve a burial option for 90 percent of veterans residing within a 75-mile service area of an open national or state cemetery.

1. Continue to encourage state grant program cemeteries as a means of providing service to veterans.
2. Continue to examine ways to expand the useful life of existing cemeteries to avoid closure and loss of service.
3. Build new national cemeteries at or near the locations of high veteran populations if neither of the previous options is possible.

AMVETS strongly supports these options, and we encourage the Committee's active review of the future burial needs of veterans and their families to ensure a continued effort to meet the growing demand for space. Clearly, without the strong commitment of Congress and its authorizing and appropriations committees, VA would likely fall short of burial space for millions of veterans and their eligible dependents.

Volume 2: National Shrine Commitment provides a system-wide comprehensive review of the conditions at 119 national cemeteries and identifies over 900 projects for gravesite renovation, repair, upgrade, and maintenance. According to the study, these project recommendations were made on the basis of the existing condition of each cemetery, after taking into account the cemetery's age, its burial activity, burial options and maintenance programs. The total estimated cost of completing these projects is nearly \$280 million, according to the study.

A major part of the contributing factor in these project repair recommendations is the accumulation of uncorrected past deficiencies. Clearly, as any public facilities manager knows, failure to correct identified deficiencies in a timely fashion will surely result in continued deterioration of facilities and increasing costs related to necessary repair. AMVETS agrees with this assessment and believes that Congress needs to carefully consider this report to address the condition of NCA cemeteries and ensure they remain respectful settings for deceased veterans and visitors. We recommend that Congress and VA work together to establish a timeline for funding these projects based on the severity of the problems.

Volume 3: Cemetery Standards of Appearance is a careful presentation of the scope of work required to elevate existing national cemeteries as national shrines. *Volume 3* serves as a planning tool to review and refine overall operations in order to express the appreciation and respect of a grateful Nation for the service and sacrifice of military veterans. In developing its response, VA closely examined some of the elements that comprise the finest military cemeteries in the world, including military cemeteries under the jurisdiction of the American Battle Monuments Commission and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission of the United Kingdom. It also examined our nation's most prominent military cemetery, Arlington National Cemetery, to help form a set of national standards to improve the appearance of NCA cemeteries and guide the application of future resources.

The report describes one of the most important elements of veterans cemeteries, namely to honor the memory of America's brave men and women who served in the Armed Forces. "The commitment of the nation," the report finds, "as expressed by law, is to create and maintain national shrines, transcending the provisions of benefits to the individual." An important part of the purpose of veterans cemeteries is to serve beyond the dignified burial of the veterans and "to serve a national purpose after the burials have ceased, even long after the visits of families and loved ones."

AMVETS agrees that the purpose of these cemeteries as national shrines is one of NCA's top priorities. Many of the individual cemeteries within the system are steeped in history and the monuments, markers, grounds and related memorial tributes represent the very foundation of these United States. With this understanding, the grounds, including monuments and individual sites of interment, represent a national treasure that deserves to be protected and nurtured.

Indeed, Congress formally recognized veterans cemeteries as national shrines in 1973 stating, "All national and other veterans cemeteries...shall be considered national shrines as a tribute to our gallant dead." (P.L. 93-43:24 1003(c))

One more point that deserves comment is individual burial benefits used by veterans in church, community, and other private sector cemeteries to include state cemeteries. The final study submitted by the Secretary appears to overlook the assessment VA contracted PricewaterhouseCoopers to complete in December 2000 on the adequacy and effectiveness of current burial benefits.

The PricewaterhouseCoopers report finds that many of the burial benefits provided veterans have seriously eroded due to inflation. AMVETS is deeply concerned that the Federal government has not increased veterans' burial benefits for the families of wounded or disabled veterans to keep up with inflation. While these benefits were never intended to cover the full cost of burial, they now pay for only a fraction of what they covered when the Federal government first started paying burial benefits for our veterans in 1973. Future congressional consideration of burial benefits should mark carefully the erosion of individual benefits and take effective actions to restore these burial benefits to a level sufficient to honor our nation's service men and women.

AMVETS recommends Congress consider several legislative updates based on the PricewaterhouseCoopers report, as follows:

- support veterans who desire burial in state facilities by increasing the plot allowance to \$745 from the current level of \$300. The plot allowance now covers only 6 percent of funeral costs. Increasing the burial benefit to \$745 would make the amount proportionally equal to the benefit paid in 1973.
- increase the service-connected burial benefits from \$2,000 to \$4,100. Prior to action in the first session of the 107th Congress, which increased the amount \$500, the benefit had been untouched since 1988. The request would restore the allowance to its original proportion of burial expense.
- increase the nonservice-connected benefit from \$300 to \$1,270, bringing it back up to its original 22 percent coverage of funeral costs. This benefit was last adjusted in 1978, and today covers just 6 percent of burial expenses.
- index these burial benefits for inflation to avoid their future erosion.

The *Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries* presents valuable information and tools for the development of a truly national veterans cemetery system. We recommend Congress give it close examination, because the suggestions it contains require congressional and administrative budgetary support.

Regarding the State Cemetery Grant Program, the State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP) complements the NCA mission to establish gravesites for veterans in those areas where NCA cannot fully respond to the burial needs of veterans. Several incentives are in place to assist states in this effort. For example, NCA can provide up to 100 percent of the development cost for an approved cemetery project, including design, construction and administration. In addition, new equipment such as mowers and backhoes can be provided for new cemeteries.

The state cemetery grants program provides funds to assist states in establishing, expanding, and improving state-owned cemeteries. The program has helped develop 56 operating cemeteries across the

country that accounted for 19,246 burials of veterans and their eligible family members in FY2004, an increase of nearly 5.6 percent over the prior year.

In FY 2004, the state cemetery grant program awarded \$39.8 million. Currently six new cemeteries are under construction: Boise, ID (the last state in US without a veterans cemetery); Wakeeney, KS (300 miles east of Denver and west of Kansas City, serving rural area in western Kansas); Winchendon, MA (serves densely populated northern MA); Killeen (Ft. Hood), TX; and Suffolk, VA (serves 200,000 veterans in Tidewater area).

The intent of the state cemetery grants program is to develop a true complement to, not a replacement for, our federal system of national cemeteries. With the enactment of the Veterans Benefits Improvements Act of 1998, the NCA has been able to strengthen its partnership with states and increase burial service to veterans, especially those living in less densely populated areas not currently served by a national cemetery.

States remain, as before enactment of the Veterans Benefits Improvements Act of 1998, totally responsible for operations and maintenance, including additional equipment needs following the initial federal purchase of equipment. The program allows states in concert with NCA to plan, design, and construct top-notch, first-class, quality cemeteries to honor veterans.

Mr. Chairman, we applaud the Subcommittee for holding this oversight hearing and thank the Subcommittee for extending the opportunity to present remarks on this important subject. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee to strengthen, enhance, and improve the earned benefits of our nations' veterans and their families. This concludes my statement, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.