

Senator Mark Warner

Statement for the Record by U.S. Sen. Mark R. Warner (D-VA)

U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Thank you Madam Chairman and Ranking Member Burr for the opportunity to testify before the committee today. I am very pleased the Committee is marking up a bill today to move through the Senate as a companion to the Senate legislation that I filed in late March. This legislation will end the improper and unofficial system of "reserved" gravesites for VIPs at Arlington National Cemetery.

I know Chairman Murray and Ranking Member Burr care as deeply about our Veterans and their families as I do and I think this shows that this is an issue that crosses party lines and we are united in an effort to get fix this problem.

Earlier this year, there were media reports about a practice of reserving gravesites for VIPs at Arlington National Cemetery. As I dug deeper into the issue, I found that this was not a one-time issue, but a practice that had continued for many years with previous superintendents. I was outraged that preferential treatment and setting aside gravesites for the friends of the superintendent was common practice, despite the fact that it was completely against Army regulations.

Although the practice of reserving gravesites has been banned by Army regulations since 1962, cemetery superintendents allowed selected "senior officials" to pick areas of the cemetery where they wished to be buried. Astonishingly, the Army's own Inspector General identified this practice as a serious violation of Army policy in the early 1990's, but nothing was done to stop the practice and the process continued.

The legislation we are discussing today will codify Army regulations that ban reserving gravesites and provide accountability and transparency to the process, with a full audit and a report back to Congress. It will also direct the Army to fully investigate and report back to Congress within 180 days on the number of plots that may have been set aside in violation of Army policy- which clearly states that Arlington National Cemetery plots must be provided to any qualified military veteran, without regard to rank or status.

It is a disgrace that back room deals apparently were being made that allowed high-ranking officers and other VIPs to pre-select the gravesites where they wished to be buried. It is offensive that this improper reservation system could allow some general to trump the Arlington burial rights of a fallen soldier from Iraq or Afghanistan.

What we're saying is, Arlington managers must follow the rules. Some general should not be able to say, "See that plot under the tree with the view? That's the one I want." I want to lend my support to Army Secretary John McHugh and Superintendent Condon, who are trying to clean up this mess after years of neglect.

This VIP reservation system is the latest in a series of problems that have emerged over the previous management of Arlington. When details first emerged about serious problems at Arlington National Cemetery, I was appalled by the reports of chronic mismanagement and requested detailed information from Secretary McHugh on Army plans to correct the issues. When the Army IG briefed me, I sensed that there could be a creative private sector solution to help fix Arlington.

I asked the Northern Virginia Technology Council for help, and they responded the next day with a group of more than 20 leading IT companies which perform data management, recovery, and digitization work every day. These 20 companies offered to produce a report for the Army pro bono, due to the historic and sacred nature of Arlington. Secretary McHugh accepted our offer, and worked with NVTC leadership to provide access.

NVTC subsequently produced a report which included both short-term and long-term recommendations for the Cemetery. It detailed potential paths to digitizing records and improvements in the way the Cemetery handled some remains. This pro-bono assessment also included workflow charts for improving business practices and suggestions on basic management techniques.

Superintendent Condon has said that many of the recommendations in the report already have been incorporated by the Army, including the hiring of additional staff and creation of a call center to improve communication with families on burial requests.

I also want to salute work I just became aware of – a project by a Virginia high school student named Rickey Gilleland. Rickey is an 11th-grade computer whiz from just down the road in Stafford County, Virginia, who apparently has succeeded in creating something that \$8 million in technology spending could not.

On his own, with his new Zoom tablet computer, Rickey created his own digitized record of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who have been laid to rest at Arlington. His website, preserveandhonor.com, catalogues the gravesites of these fallen heroes.

Now why would it be so hard for the Army to produce the same kind of digital record and guide for all of the other heroes buried at Arlington?

And finally, for nearly 130 years, the Commonwealth of Virginia has proudly provided a final resting place for our nation's military men and women at Arlington National Cemetery. I look forward to continuing our efforts to make sure that the men and women who have bravely served our country are buried with honor and dignity.

I want to repeat my earlier calls to have the Army implement the recommendations contained in the NVTC report. And if they need help, I know a certain 11th grader who might have a few ideas. Thank you, Madam Chairman.