

WILLIAM F. TUERK UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT
OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF
WILLIAM F. TUERK
UNDER SECRETARY FOR MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
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HONOLULU, HAWAII

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on issues of great interest to Hawaii veterans.

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), which is responsible for burial flags and monetary burial benefits, jointly administer the Department of Veterans Affairs' burial and funeral benefits for veterans. We, in NCA, have four statutory missions under title 38, United States Code:

- o To provide burial for eligible veterans and their eligible dependents and to maintain those places of burial as national shrines;
- o To provide Government-furnished headstones and markers for the graves of eligible veterans worldwide;
- o To administer the State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP), which provides Federal funds up to 100 percent of the development cost for establishing, expanding and improving veterans cemeteries owned and operated by the States; and
- o To administer the Presidential Memorial Certificate (PMC) program, which provides the families of honorably discharged, deceased veterans Certificates bearing the signature of the President, to commemorate the veterans' service.

NCA currently maintains more than 2.8 million gravesites at 125 national cemeteries in 39 States and Puerto Rico, as well as 33 soldiers' lots and monument sites. Since 1973, when Congress created a National Cemetery System under the jurisdiction of VA, annual interments in VA national cemeteries have almost tripled from 36,400 to about 97,000 in FY 2006. We expect to perform nearly 105,000 interments in 2008, an 8.3 percent increase over the number performed in 2006. NCA processed more than 336,000 applications for Government-furnished headstones and markers for the graves of veterans worldwide and issued nearly 406,000 Presidential Memorial Certificates to the families of eligible veterans in FY 2006. Sixty-seven State veterans cemeteries funded under the SCGP are operated in 34 States, Guam and Saipan-of which 8 are located in Hawaii.

Meeting the Burial Needs of Veterans

One of VA's primary missions is to ensure that the burial needs of veterans are met. In support of this mission, VA's goal is to provide veterans with reasonable access to a burial option (whether

for casketed or cremated remains) in a national or State veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their residence.

Our ability to provide reasonable access to a burial option is a critical measure of the effectiveness of our service delivery to veterans and their families. Currently, 83.5 percent of all veterans in the Nation are served by a burial option in a national or State veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their homes. NCA intends to increase the percentage of veterans served to 90 percent by FY 2010. Strategic initiatives are in place to meet this goal. They are:

- o Establishment of additional national cemeteries in unserved areas;
- o Expansion of existing national cemeteries to provide continued service; and
- o Establishment or expansion of State veterans cemeteries through the SCGP.

NCA will continue to expand, and make improvements to, existing national cemeteries by acquiring additional land, where possible, and completing development projects that make additional gravesites or columbaria available for interments. We have major and minor construction projects underway to expand the life cycles of several national cemeteries so that they can continue to meet the burial needs of veterans in their geographic regions. One such project was here at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (NMCP) where a columbarium expansion project was undertaken to add 4,160 niches to allow the cemetery to remain open for cremated remains until 2011.

Dedicated on September 2, 1949, on the fourth anniversary of the end of World War II, the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (the Punchbowl) originally provided a final resting place for approximately 13,000 World War II casualties from Guadalcanal, Burma, Saipan, Guam, Iwo Jima, the prison camps of Japan and other battlegrounds of the Pacific as well as Hawaii's own sons from other theaters of war. Among the nearly 30,000 graves tended today, 57 Medal of Honor recipients are interred or memorialized.

In 2006, over 950 burials were performed at NMCP; 105 were full-casket burials of eligible family members of those already buried at the cemetery. NCA also furnished 477 headstones or markers for eligible Hawaii veterans interred at private cemeteries and provided over 500 Presidential Memorial Certificates to honor the service of Hawaii veterans.

NMCP has undergone numerous improvements over the years to ensure that it remains a national shrine to honor all those who served their country. Several projects currently in design illustrate NCA's commitment to retaining this unique national treasure as an active national cemetery and as a special ceremonial venue for commemorating the dedicated men and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

NCA is designing an additional columbarium expansion project at NMCP which we anticipate will add over 3,000 niches for the inurnment of cremated remains. This project would extend the life of the cemetery to approximately 2016. We are committed to constructing this project so to ensure there could be no lapse in future gravesite availability until that date. We are also studying the feasibility of potential columbarium projects further into the future. Among the options to be considered will be the relocation of administrative functions, where possible, to provide for grave site expansion in suitable areas. Towards this end, options for the design of a new administration building and visitors information center are under development. I assure you that we will take every opportunity to employ innovative methods to maximize the space available to continue to serve the needs of our veterans at NMCP. We are determined to preserve NMCP as the cherished icon that it is, one that is known throughout the world.

State Cemetery Grants Program

Established by Public Law 95-476 in 1978 to complement VA's network of national cemeteries, the NCA State Cemetery Grants Program (SCGP) provides funding up to 100 percent for the development and start up equipment costs for State veterans cemetery projects. At the end of July 2007, VA had awarded 156 grants totaling more than \$286 million to establish, expand or improve 71 veterans cemeteries nationwide. Utilizing VA grant funding, sixty-seven State cemeteries are currently operational and four new State cemeteries are under construction. In FY 2006, State veterans cemeteries provided for 22,434 burials, 19 percent of all burials in either a national or State veterans cemetery.

As a complement to our national cemeteries, the State Cemetery Grants Program is vital to achieving NCA's burial access goal and permitting NCA to meet the needs of veterans in less populated areas where the concentration of veterans cannot meet NCA's criterion for the establishment of a national cemetery. Nowhere is access to veterans cemeteries more extensive than in Hawaii, where 100 percent of veterans are served within 75 miles of their homes by the presence of a State veterans cemetery.

Hawaii leads all States in the development and operation of State veterans cemeteries, and ranks as the ninth busiest State in providing burial services to veterans and their families in State veterans cemeteries. Of its eight State veterans cemeteries, only East Hawaii Veterans Cemetery No. 1 is closed to new interments. The seven operating veterans cemeteries are:

Hawaii State Veterans Cemetery (Island of Oahu);
East Hawaii Veterans Cemetery No. 2 (in Hilo on the Island of Hawaii);
West Hawaii Veterans Cemetery (on the Kona Coast of the Island of Hawaii);
Kauai Veterans Cemetery (Island of Kauai);
Maui Veterans Cemetery (Island of Maui);
Molokai Hawaii Veterans Cemetery (Island of Molokai); and
Lanai Veterans Cemetery (Island of Lanai).

I am privileged to have had an opportunity visit five of these sites. In 2006, 1,171 veterans were interred in a Hawaii veterans cemetery, either at NMCP or in one of the 7 open Hawaii State veterans cemeteries.

NCA has provided over \$11 million in grants for Hawaii State veterans cemeteries. Recently, the Hawaii Congressional delegation requested assistance from NCA to work with the West Hawaii State Veterans Cemetery to ensure national shrine standards were being met. To do so, we are currently processing an award for more than \$700,000 for the phased expansion at West Hawaii State Veterans Cemetery that will provide local veterans with access to a full-casket burial option on both the east and west side of the island of Hawaii. This project includes the purchase of grave liners to assist cemetery staff in maintaining the grounds to meet the highest standards of appearance. Project plans also address infrastructure needs at the facility, to include construction of a permanent committal shelter, rest rooms, improved equipment storage facilities, and roadways. NCA will continue to serve as a partner with the State in the expansion and improvement of Hawaii State cemeteries to serve Hawaii veterans on every island.

In addition to grants, NCA also provides technical assistance and support to State cemetery field and administrative staff through site visits and invitations to participate in NCA's annual and

regional conferences where innovative operational techniques, best management practices and ideas are exchanged. Hawaii has also cultivated successful working partnerships with the counties in operating and maintaining the State cemeteries, a technique now being considered by other States.

Hawaii has met the challenge of operating multiple State cemeteries through the use of innovative cooperative agreements between public and private entities. The recent water and planting improvement project the State undertook at West Hawaii State Cemetery addressed the difficult and unique site conditions at the cemetery. Successful projects such as this demonstrate Hawaii's ingenuity in maintaining all veterans cemeteries as national shrines that honor the service of our country's service members. We hope that other States will follow Hawaii's lead. We hope that they will build successful partnerships with VA as pioneered by the State of Hawaii. Be assured that NCA will continue in its strong support of the cemeteries here in Hawaii today and in the future. We are grateful for your vital cooperation in commemorating our nation's veterans. We are also grateful, Mr. Chairman, for your steadfast support for NCA, and for our Nation's veterans.

That concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to entertain any questions you or the other members of the Committee may have.