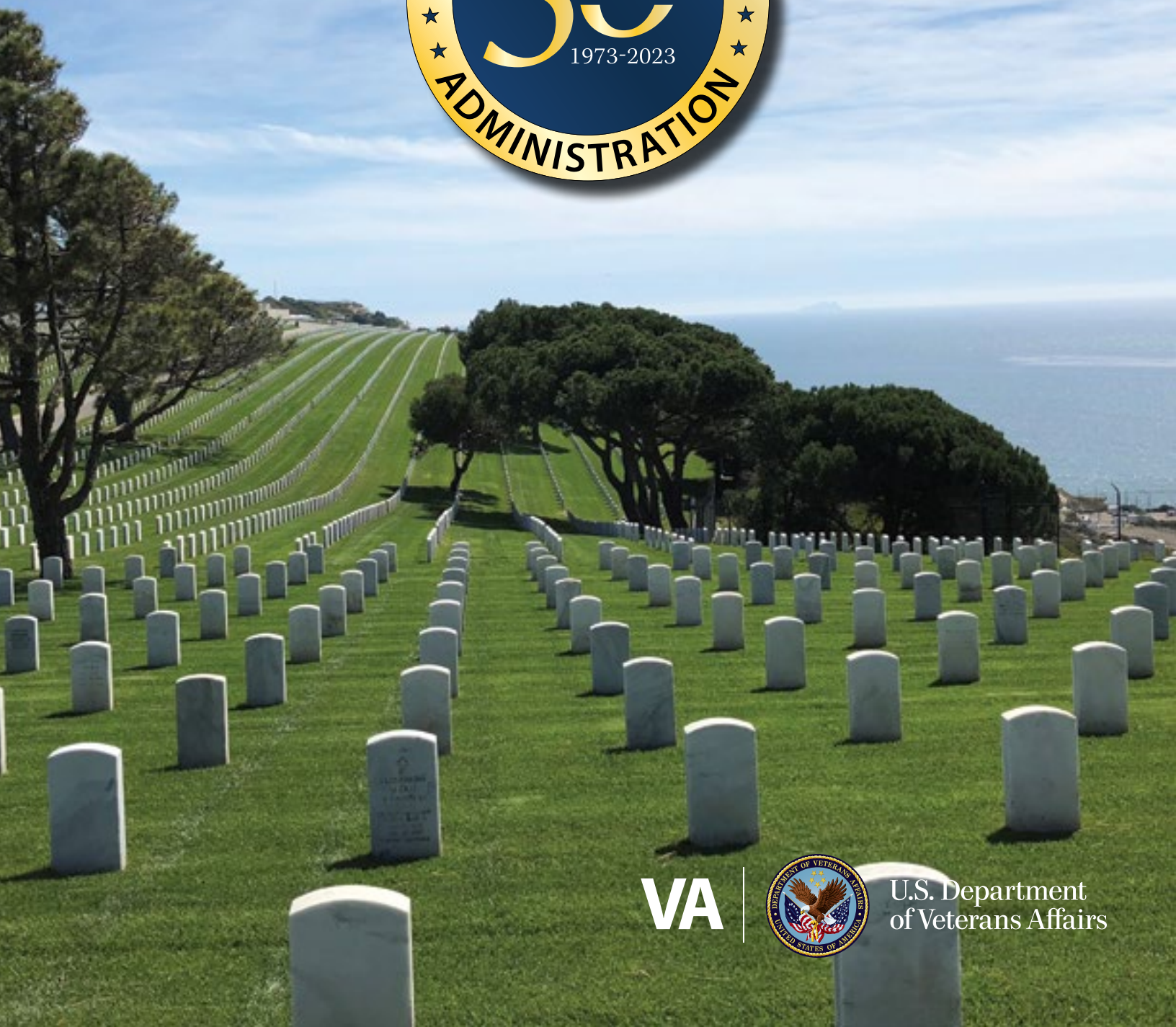


# VANGUARD

Fall 2023

One Nation, Forever Grateful



VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

## Our Mission

To honor Veterans, service members and their eligible family members with final resting places in national shrines, with lasting tributes that commemorate their service and sacrifice to our nation.

## Burial Benefits

Scan code to learn more  
**Burial & Memorial Benefits**



Burial benefits include a gravesite in any of the VA national cemeteries with available space, opening and closing of the grave, perpetual care, a government headstone, marker or medallion, a burial flag and a Presidential Memorial Certificate. There is no cost to the family. Some Veterans may also be eligible for burial allowances. Cremated remains are buried or inurned in national cemeteries in the same manner and with the same honors as casketed remains.

Burial benefits available for spouses and dependents buried in a national cemetery include burial with the Veteran, perpetual care, and the spouse or dependents name and date of birth and death inscribed on the Veteran's headstone. There is no cost to the family. Eligible spouses and dependents may be buried, even if they predecease the Veteran.

The Veteran's family should make funeral or cremation arrangements with a funeral provider or cremation office. Any item or service obtained from a funeral home or cremation office will be at the family's expense.

## Veterans Legacy Memorial

Scan code for additional  
details about **VLM**



The Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) is the nation's first digital platform dedicated entirely to the memory of more than 4.8 million Veterans interred in VA national cemeteries; VA grant-funded tribal, state and territory Veteran cemeteries; DoD-managed cemeteries (including Arlington National Cemetery); and two U.S. Park Service national cemeteries.

Launched in 2019, individual Veteran profile pages are populated with military service and cemetery information. Publicly available information gathered from VA records includes service branch with logo, dates of birth and death, rank, war period, decorations, emblem of belief and cemetery information.

Interactive features allow family, friends and others to preserve a Veteran's legacy by posting tributes (comments), uploading images, sharing a Veteran's military service timeline and achievements, biographical information, historical documents and more.

## Pre-need Eligibility

Scan code for additional details and  
to apply for **pre-need eligibility**



Reduce stress for your family during their time of loss. Apply in advance to determine burial eligibility. Pre-need determination of eligibility allows you to plan your burial ahead of time, relieving your loved ones of the burden.

**23,004**

total acreage of VA  
national cemeteries

**155**

VA national cemeteries

**87**

open to all interments

**22**

open to interments of  
cremated remains only

**5,301,931**

total interred in VA  
national cemeteries

**149,919**

total interments in VA  
national cemeteries  
in FY 22

**362,634**

total headstones/markers provided  
for U.S. Veterans and family  
members worldwide in FY 22

**463,547**

Presidential Memorial  
Certificates (PMCs) to  
Veterans' loved ones in FY 22

**2,200+**

employees

**68.5%**

employee Veterans

**55.1%**

Veterans with  
disabilities

**9.2%**

women Veterans



National Cemetery  
Administration

[www.cem.va.gov](http://www.cem.va.gov)

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### On the Cover

Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery

# A Conversation with the Secretary

By Denis McDonough

**O**liver Villalobos is an Assistant Director at Riverside National Cemetery in California. In June 2016 he received the Department of Veterans Affairs Customer Service Award from Secretary Robert McDonald. In December 2016 he was awarded the White House Presidential Customer Service Award by President Barack Obama. From April 2017 to June 2020, Mr. Villalobos worked for the American Battle Monuments Commission Corozal American and Mexico City national cemeteries as the Superintendent. He was promoted to Deputy Director for Cemetery Operations in Paris, France, with responsibilities for 12 cemeteries, before rejoining NCA in 2020.



**Secretary McDonough:** I see you're wearing your American/Marine Corps lapel pin. Tell me about your service in the Marine Corps.

**Oliver Villalobos:** I was in an artillery regiment at Camp Pendleton. I served in Hawaii and deployed to Okinawa. The Marines got me ready for the next steps in my life.

**Secretary McDonough:** What drew you to join NCA after the Marine Corps?

**Oliver Villalobos:** I was working at the post office in downtown LA, and we moved out near Riverside. I was commuting several hours per day and didn't like that commute. I just happened to look at USAJobs and found a cemetery caretaker position open.

**Secretary McDonough:** After a few years you left for the American Battle Monuments Commission. What led to that?

**Oliver Villalobos:** I received a Customer Service Award from Secretary McDonald in 2016. Principal Deputy Under Secretary Ron Walters was there, too. I went into the office and he said, "Hey, you speak Spanish? ABMC is looking for a director. Are you interested in that?" I heard a voice from behind me: "Oh yeah, we're going to go." It was my wife, Denise.

**Secretary McDonough:** Amazing. It just so happens that a couple of bosses were right there with you, Robert McDonald, Principal Deputy Under Secretary Walters and your wife. They decided that you're going to go?

**Oliver Villalobos:** That's right, the three bosses decided my fate that day. My first assignment was Superintendent of Corozal American Cemetery in Mexico City and the Surrender Tree Monument in Santiago de Cuba.

**Secretary McDonough:** Amazing. Tell me about the Surrender Tree monument in Santiago de Cuba.

***Editor's Note:** The Santiago Surrender Tree Memorial is located in Santiago, Cuba. The monument marks the site where Spanish forces, led by Gen. Jose Toral, surrendered Santiago de Cuba to U.S. forces, led by Gen. William Shafter, on July 17, 1898, during the Spanish American War. By an Act of Congress, the Santiago Surrender Tree became the responsibility of ABMC on July 1, 1958.*

**Oliver Villalobos:** ABMC is responsible for many monuments in different countries. For this one, we couldn't be in country to directly care for it so we had to rely on tourists sending us pictures. Then we hired local staff to do the maintenance for us.

**Secretary McDonough:** Then you went to Paris.

**Oliver Villalobos:** Yes, I got promoted to Deputy Director for Cemetery Operations where I oversaw several cemeteries. It was special because my son was born at the American Hospital in Paris. He's been fortunate to travel with me to many American cemeteries in Rome, Florence, Normandy and Belleau Wood.

**Secretary McDonough:** What led you back to NCA?

**Oliver Villalobos:** I got the opportunity to come back and be an assistant director where I started my career. This is my home. I'll probably end up being buried here.

**Secretary McDonough:** You have a special memory at Riverside.

**Oliver Villalobos:** Yes, Corporal Claudio Patino. He was a Marine killed in the Helmand province in Afghanistan. During my first tour at Riverside, I oversaw his burial. His mom asked me in Spanish if I knew her son. I didn't. She was devastated. I promised her that I would take care of him. We became friends that day. Now that I'm back, we've reconnected.

**Secretary McDonough:** Tell me about your leadership philosophy.

**Oliver Villalobos:** It ties back to Claudio and our unofficial motto that "we only get one chance to get it right."

**Secretary McDonough:** You only get one chance to get it right. That's amazing. I've not heard that on an official statement before.

**Secretary McDonough:** NCA leads the country again in customer satisfaction rating. What can the rest of the us learn from NCA?

**Oliver Villalobos:** The most important thing is that our leaders give us the latitude and freedom to make decisions and promote staff development and training. Diversity and inclusion are critical to success as is a commitment to servant leadership. And there's nothing more important to us than the Veteran and the family. Our NCA team is the best.

**Secretary McDonough:** You're right that it's about the team. You are a uniquely capable leader. I'm thrilled that you came back to NCA.

**Oliver Villalobos:** Thank you, sir, for giving me the time to represent the National Cemetery Administration. ♦

# NCA's 50th Anniversary

By Matt Quinn, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs



Matt Quinn, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs,  
National Cemetery Administration

This is truly a very special year for the National Cemetery Administration, one in which we are reminded that our present success stands on the shoulders of the many outstanding team members who made the past 50 years so successful.

As you will see in the pages of this special edition of VAnguard, over the past half

century NCA has increased cemetery access for Veterans by growing from 103 to 155 national cemeteries while also funding the construction of another 122 state, territorial and tribal Veteran cemeteries through our Veterans Cemetery Grants Program.

By expanding so dramatically, we greatly increased access to the burial and memorial benefits our Veterans have earned through their service to our nation. As we mark our 50th year, 94% of all Veterans live within 75 miles of a VA national or grant-funded cemetery. Our future expansion goals show our determination to reach even more Veterans.

We are also marking the 45th anniversary of VCGP, which I believe is the best partnership in all of government. Earlier this year, NCA crossed the \$1 billion mark in total VA grants distributed to state, territorial and tribal Veterans cemeteries through VCGP, a milestone likely not foreseen when the program began in 1978.

Several of my relatives, including my father and my brother, are resting in the Montana State Veterans cemetery that meets the same national shrine standards as NCA's own cemeteries. I fully understand how comforting it is for surviving family members to know their loved ones are being provided the highest level of care in perpetuity.

VCGP is our largest partnership, but not our only one. We could not do what we do without crucial support from

our fellow VA colleagues, Veterans service organizations, funeral home directors and our many NCA volunteers serving their local Veterans cemeteries.

Most of all, I know that NCA is a great organization because I've seen the relentless hard work and dedication of our 2,200 team members. They put in the extra effort to make sure Veterans and family members receive the recognition and support they deserve.

I am extremely proud that NCA remains the national leader in customer satisfaction, according to the American Customer Satisfaction Index. I am especially proud that in 2022 we matched our previous score of 97—the highest ASCI score ever measured. This is the seventh consecutive time NCA has been ranked first in customer satisfaction among the nation's top companies and federal agencies.

While recognizing our achievements to this point, our team is still focused on ways we can serve Veterans and their families today and into the future. We are improving how we hire and train our workforce. We are staying ahead of trends in the ways families choose to lay their loved ones to rest, as we add more columbaria and pursue green burial options at our cemeteries.

Another example of how the future may be different—and better—has emerged here at NCA within the past few years. We are now streamlining the application process and increasing automation to better serve those seeking VA burial benefits.

One example of NCA using modern technology is our online Veterans Legacy Memorial. Launched in 2019, VLM has transformed our job of memorializing Veterans beyond just the physical world of the cemetery.

Recently we added more than 300,000 pages for Veterans and service members interred in 27 Department of Defense administered military cemeteries, including Arlington National Cemetery and the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery.

This digital remembrance space now features individual pages for 4.8 million Veterans. One day soon I hope every Veteran who has ever received a VA headstone or marker will also have a VLM page, no matter where their final resting place may be. We are even exploring whether Veterans who have completed pre-need eligibility could provide content for their future VLM pages before they pass.

NCA honors Veterans' legacies in other ways. Our Veterans Legacy Program works with educators and students to tell the stories of deceased Veterans interred in federal or VA grant-funded state and tribal cemeteries.



You can read more about this highly successful educational program in a separate article in this special edition of VAnguard.

We also provide grave markers and columbarium niche covers for Veterans interred in non-VA cemeteries, including overseas locations, or medallions denoting their status as Veterans. And when a Veteran passes away, we provide a Presidential Memorial Certificate signed by the President of the United States expressing the nation's gratitude for their service.

Serving as Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs is a high honor. I am deeply impressed by our dedicated team members who do the hard work accommodating grieving families and helping them through their most difficult time.

It is the most rewarding experience to meet our crews in the field and witness the incredible work they do. I could not be prouder to be associated with them. These patriots are leading the way for the next 50 years of the National Cemetery Administration. ♦

## Our People: The Reason I Am Here

Jennifer Jessup, NCA Chief of Staff



Jennifer Jessup, Chief of Staff, National Cemetery Administration

I came to the Department of Veterans Affairs for a job but stayed for the mission.

Twenty years ago, I was finishing my master's degree in counseling and researching next steps when I stumbled upon a website for an internship program with the federal government. On a whim, I applied. After a rigorous selection process, several months later I was walking through the Washington Convention Center as a Presidential Management Fellow finalist and trying to get matched with a job. All of the recruiters were looking for candidates with political science, public policy

or law degrees. I had none of those. After several unsuccessful interviews, I was dejectedly walking down rows and rows of tables when I passed someone with a nametag that read "Counseling Psychologist." I stopped in my tracks, looked down at the table's banner and did not recognize the agency. I was interviewed on the spot and soon offered a job with Veteran Readiness and Employment Service in the Veterans Benefits Administration. I accepted.

I moved to Washington, D.C., in 2003 thinking I would stay with VA a few years and then move on. I didn't grow up in a military family—typical of western Pennsylvania, my dad initially worked in the steel mills and my mom took care of the kids at home. I had little connection to the military beyond my grandfather's service and he had passed away before I was born. But my passion for helping people grew to encompass a new dedication for those who sacrifice for our freedom. It didn't take long for me to call VA "home" for my career.

I began to regularly visit our national cemeteries while traveling with Secretary Eric Shinseki in 2011. Every employee I talked with at every cemetery I visited spoke with pride about their work. Every person knew how important it was to make every moment count, to make that

moment count, because they didn't have an opportunity for a second chance with families. I knew then I wanted to work in NCA.

It's no wonder that NCA employees have a legacy of outstanding service—nearly 70% of you are Veterans. You personally know the dedication and sacrifice Veterans and their families have earned and deserve because you have lived it. And it shows! NCA was honored to receive a score of 97 in the prestigious American Customer Satisfaction Index for 2022. This is the seventh consecutive time we have led all organizations, public or private, in customer satisfaction. And our internal customer satisfaction scores tell the same story: 98.8% of respondents would recommend a national cemetery to Veteran families during their time of need.

NCA employees, you are the reason I am here today—this isn't just a job for you, it's a mission that you take to heart. The work you do every day is amazing. With every shovel of dirt, every blade of grass cut, every phone call answered, every certificate scribed, every headstone placed, every program managed, and every Veteran honored through history and legacy—you are what makes NCA successful. And I'm honored to serve with you. ♦



# 50 Years in Photos







1. World War II aircraft carrier U.S.S. Bunker Hill (CV 17) is towed past Ft. Rosecrans National Cemetery en route to being scrapped, 1973. DoD photo

2. Columbarium niche cover, Snake River Canyon National Cemetery. Photo by Martin Wright, NCA Public Affairs

3. Winter at Bakersfield National Cemetery. Photo by Cindy Van Bibber, Cemetery Director

4. U.S. Colored Troop reenactors escort a horse drawn caisson during a service at Ft. Custer National Cemetery, Michigan, 1986. NCA History Collection

5. Nicole Yansky visits the grave of her husband, Quantico National Cemetery. NCA Photo by Martin Wright







Memorial Day postcard, 1909. The NCA Historical collection contains over 200 of these postcards from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.  
NCA photo

## Before the NCA

For its first 111 years, from 1862-1973, the National Cemetery System was administered by the U.S. Army. NCA carries on the proud history and legacy of these cemeteries today.

Internal VA newsletter article, 1973.

### WELCOME ABOARD

## NATIONAL CEMETERY SYSTEM NOW UNDER VA

The National Cemetery System, established in VA by the enactment of PL 93-43 on June 18, 1973, provided for the transfer of certain National Cemeteries from the Department of Defense to the VA on September 1, 1973. In a letter of welcome to its approximately 900 employees, Administrator Johnson stated, "transferring cemetery activities from the U.S. Army Memorial Affairs Agency to the VA adds a new dimension to the range of benefits and services we are responsible for administering."

Legally and administratively, the move was carefully planned to make the change-over as smooth and as error-free as possible.

Interpretations of the Act involved intensive research by General Counsel attorneys. Determinations were made as to who was entitled to burial in a national cemetery and under what circumstances; the appropriateness of memorials or markers; the allowances for burial in non-government cemeteries; the future acquisition of lands, and other benefits and requirements covered by the Act.

Controller and Personnel employees tackled the myriad of details involved in transferring employees and their records from one agency to another. Nearby VA hospital personnel and fiscal staffs geared up to service the cemetery employees in their area. Finally, Central Office fiscal and personnel teams went to the three Army civilian personnel offices and the Pentagon where the records for the cemetery employees were kept and, folder by folder, coded every item needed to bring the new employees onto VA's master PAID (Personnel Accounting Integrated Data) record.

The Director of the National Cemetery System in Central Office is responsible for the operation of the program through three National Cemetery Supervising Offices located in Philadelphia, Pa., Atlanta, Ga., and Stockton, Calif.

VA's three departments and its staff offices in Washington, D.C., extend their best wishes to their new sister service.

**July 17, 1862** - Congress authorizes President Lincoln to purchase cemetery grounds to be used as national cemeteries. This created the first 14 national cemeteries located near major battlefields, POW sites, and hospitals

**November 19, 1863** - President Lincoln delivers his 272-word Gettysburg Address during the dedication of Gettysburg National Cemetery

**1867** - National Cemetery Act appropriates \$750,000 to build national cemeteries





1905 Historic Postcard, Beaufort National Cemetery.  
NCA photo

1909 Decoration Day photo,  
Los Angeles National Cemetery.  
Photo by Soldier's Home



1938 Historic Lodge construction, Baltimore National Cemetery. NCA has 54 historical lodges in its inventory.  
NCA photo



1949 Front Gate, Los Angeles National Cemetery.  
VA Photo



**May 30, 1868** - Grand Army of the Republic issues General Order 11 designating formal observation of "Decoration Day," later Memorial Day

**1871** - From 1865 to 71, Federal Reburial Program reinters 300,000 Union Civil War dead. Approximately 40% are unknowns

JROTC Sea Cadet holds Navy flag at Crown Hill columbarium dedication June 30, 2022.  
NCA Photo by Martin Wright.



Dad and sons at Hampton National Cemetery Memorial Day 2021.  
NCA Photo by Martin Wright



Caretakers conducting Global Position System/Geographic Information System procedures during an interment to ensure proper accounting of remains.: From Left to Right: Dennis Nelson, John Jackowsk, Spencer Jungclaus and Gen Apolo.  
Photo by Stephan Frank, NCA District Executive.



Hershel "Woody" Williams earned the Medal of Honor at Iwo Jima. He was the last living Medal of Honor recipient from World War II. Shown here saluting during a ceremony at Quantico National Cemetery in 2019, he died on June 29, 2022, and is now interred at Donel C. Kinnard Memorial State Veterans Cemetery, West Virginia.  
NCA Photo by Martin Wright.



**1873** - Marble, durable headstones adopted to replace wooden grave markers

**1879** - Congress authorizes government headstones for Veterans buried in private cemeteries



Veterans hold flags lining the road at  
Bakersfield National Cemetery, May 28, 2022.  
NCA Photo



Members of the Italian-American War Veterans fire a 21-gun salute during a World War I memorial ceremony at Camp Butler National Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois, on April 6, 2017. The ceremony marked the 100th anniversary of the United States entering World War I.  
U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Patrick J. DeGeorge, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs



Calverton National Cemetery employees and guests conduct a special ceremony for Veterans on April 13, 2011. On the second Wednesday of each month the cemetery organizes a color guard and a flag folding detail to give proper honors to Veterans who were buried without friends or family at their ceremony.  
Photo by Sgt. Randall Clinton



Members of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) participate in a disinterment ceremony at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, Honolulu, Hawaii, Nov. 7, 2022. This is part of DPAA's efforts to disinter and identify the remains of unknown service members lost during the Korean War.  
U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. John Miller



**1903** - Mountain Home Branch of the National Asylum for Disabled Volunteered Soldiers established, includes the first Veterans cemetery of the 20th century

**1917-1918** - Use of Dog Tags in WWI vastly reduces number of unknown burials

1903

1904-1916

1917 - 1918





Abraham Lincoln impersonator Max Daniels and Mary Todd Lincoln impersonator Donna Daniels at a Memorial Day ceremony, Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery, May 31, 2010.

Photo by Staff Sgt Cassidy Snyder.

Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Ron Walters meets with a student at Black Hills National Cemetery.

NCA photo



Mt. Rainier is seen as Carry the Load marchers exit Tahoma National Cemetery, Tahoma, Washington, on April 28, 2023. Carry the Load is one of many non-profit partners that help NCA commemorate and honor the fallen.

NCA Photo by Martin Wright.

A child places flags at Florida National Cemetery in preparation for Memorial Day 2022.

NCA photo.



**1922** - The "general" style headstone, still in use today, is approved by a board of officers led by Gen. John J. Pershing

**July 21, 1930** - Congress creates the Veterans Administration.





Gold Star Mothers at Fort Logan National Cemetery for the annual Vietnam Commemoration.

U.S. Soldiers assigned to Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa display the American flag at the grave of World War II Veteran Arthur Lewis during a burial honors ceremony at the New European Cemetery in Djibouti City, Djibouti, Oct. 28, 2021. NCA provides a headstone or marker for U.S. Veterans interred anywhere in the world.

Photo by Senior Airman Dwane Young



Salute at Flat Gravesite Marker section, Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery.

Photo by Brooke Culler, NCA

Girl Scouts place wreaths at Yellowstone National Cemetery December 27, 2022.

Photo by Ed Saunders.



**1934-1939** - First expansion of the cemetery system using Veteran demographic data to make burial access more convenient

**1936** - Flat markers in marble, granite or bronze are introduced

**1947-1951** - "Return of the Dead Program" repatriates 170,000 WWII dead from overseas, 20% buried in national cemeteries

**1951** - No new national cemeteries constructed between 1951 to 1975

1936

1937-1950

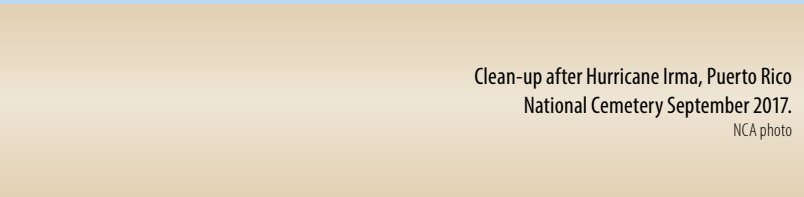
1951

1952-1960





**Bob Hope Memorial Chapel, Los Angeles National Cemetery.**  
Photo by Cuauhtemoc Meza Davila



**Clean-up after Hurricane Irma, Puerto Rico National Cemetery September 2017.**  
NCA photo



**A young boy traces the cross engraved on his great-grandfather's headstone at Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell, Fla., May 25, 2015.**  
Photo by Senior Airman Melanie Bulow-Gonterman



**U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Nolan Pasqualetti, stands ready to perform at the Wreaths Across America event at the Fort Richardson National Cemetery, Alaska, Dec. 19, 2021.**  
U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Mario Calabro



**June 18, 1973 - President Nixon signs National Cemetery Act**

**1962 - Presidential Memorial Certificate program started by President Kennedy**

**September 1, 1973 - VA assumes oversight of National Cemetery System; 82 Army cemeteries transfer to VA, joining 21 cemeteries already maintained by VA.; Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials established**





A Tuskegee Airman Veteran looks on during the interment of a fellow Tuskegee Airman, Flight Officer Edwin Cowan, at Cape Canaveral National Cemetery, Feb. 7, 2019.

Photo by Airman 1st Class Dalton Williams



Korean War Veterans Association members Bob Gushanas (left), Bill Weber and Dan Foulks salute during a 2022 ceremony at Rock Island National Cemetery.

Photo by Staci-Jill Burnley



Gold Star Families Monument. NCA has over 1,300 monuments in its inventory.



Totem Poles made by David Boxley unveiled at dedication of Metlakatla Veterans Memorial Cemetery, Metlakatla Alaska.

Photo courtesy of David Boxley

**1978** - Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) established to complement VA national cemeteries

**1980** - Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery in Maryland receives first VCGP establishment grant

**1980** - WWI Signal Corps Telephone Operator Melina Olive Shaw is first burial at Massachusetts National Cemetery

1978

1979

1980

1981-1985



“Military Terri” Winter was the first female commander of the Memorial Rifle Squad at Fort Snelling National Cemetery. In 2014, she was featured in a local news article in the Star Tribune.  
Photo by Kyndell Harkness, Star Tribune

Sons of the American Revolution at a memorial service for Revolutionary War Soldier, Pvt. Oliver Barrett at Saratoga National Cemetery October 19, 2022. Barrett served with the 10th Massachusetts Regiment and was killed at the Battle of Breymann Redoubt in October 1777. Taps was not played as that became tradition during the Civil War. Instead, the re-enactors fired the cannon. While Barrett’s remains were never found, he, like most Veterans, is entitled to a marker. Eligibility never expires.  
Photo by Army Staff Sgt. Matthew Gunther.



WWII Veteran, Fayetteville National Cemetery.  
NCA photo

Rifle salute conducted at Santa Fe National Cemetery, 1993.  
NCA Photo



**1998** - Remains of Michael Blassie (Tomb of the Unknown) identified and reinterred at Jefferson Barracks

**November 11, 1998:** National Cemetery System re-designated the National Cemetery Administration; NCA principal elevated from Director to Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Memorial Affairs.

**2000** - Robert “Mike” Walker becomes NCA’s first Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs

**2001** - Robin Higgins becomes first female Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs





A time capsule is placed inside the Soldiers' Monument at Togus National Cemetery by then Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Steve Muro. The monument was originally built in 1889, but had deteriorated, requiring a total rebuild. During dismantling a time capsule was found and replacement time capsule was placed there during the rebuild in 2010.

**National POW-MIA monument, Riverside National Cemetery.**  
Photo by Michael Serrano, NCA Management Analyst



**Water-wise landscape, Fort Bliss National Cemetery.**  
NCA photo

**Volunteers place wreaths during Wreaths Across America, Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery.**  
NCA photo



**2004** - National Training Center in St. Louis opened to provide standardized training

**2009** - Gettysburg Address tablets are cast once again so that they can be displayed at all national cemeteries

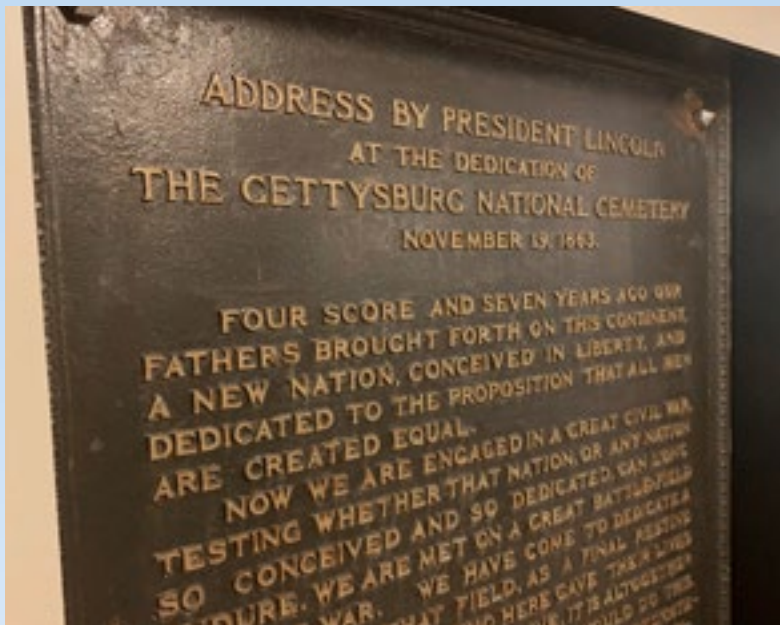




President Bill Clinton speaks at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific during the Victory over Japan Day 50th Anniversary Ceremony in 1995.  
Photo Courtesy of Bill Clinton Presidential Library



Lightning illuminates flagpole,  
Yellowstone National Cemetery,  
July 4, 2016.  
Photo by Ed Saunders



Cast iron plaque of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address on display at VA headquarters in Washington, D.C. Plaques like this were installed in all national cemeteries between 1909 and 1950. Replicas of this plaque were again produced starting in 2009 so that every national cemetery can display one.

NCA Photo by Martin Wright

Former Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs and retired Marine Lt. Col. Robin Higgins (2000-2001) christens the bow of the Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer USS HIGGINS (DDG 76) on Oct. 4, 1997. The vessel was named for her late husband, Col. William Higgins, a United Nations peacekeeper, kidnapped and killed in Lebanon. After his remains were recovered and identified, he was interred at Quantico National Cemetery in Virginia.

Photo by DoD



**2011** - Urban initiative established using columbaria to serve Veteran populations in large cities

**November 11, 2011** - Monte Calvario Cemetery opens near Tuscon, Arizona, the first Tribal VCGP cemetery

**May 26, 2014** - Yellowstone National Cemetery transferred to NCA becomes first Rural Initiative Cemetery





Memorial Day march to Natchez National Cemetery in Mississippi, 2016.  
Photo by Christopher Windfield

Killed when his A-37 Dragonfly was shot down over Vietnam in 1972, Michael Joseph Blassie's remains could not be positively identified. His remains were subsequently interred as the unknown service member of the Vietnam War in the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery. There he rested from 1984-1998, until DNA testing confirmed the remains were Blassie. His family requested he be re-interred at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery near his St. Louis home.

Photo by Brooke Culler, NCA Program Specialist



Soldiers carry the remains of Cpl. Frank L. Sandoval, Prisoner of War during the Korean Conflict, to their final resting place at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, July 11, 2017. His remains were identified by the Defense Department's POW/MIA Accounting Agency using DNA technology.

Photo by Olivia Mendoza, U.S. Air Force

President Barack Obama at Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery during a Memorial Day Ceremony, May 31, 2010.

Photo Courtesy of Barack Obama Presidential Library.



**October 5, 2019** - Los Angeles National Cemetery columbarium dedicated, the first urban initiative project completed

**2015** - Bronze plaque placed at 56th Colored Infantry obelisk at Jefferson Barracks that was struck in 1866

**May 30, 2016** - Veterans Legacy Program launched

**May 27, 2019** - Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) platform launched





Marine Veteran Jon Gurley is comforted by Gunner, who was trained by PawsForLiberty to comfort PTSD survivors. South Florida National Cemetery, 2013.  
Photo by Cindy Merritt



Bird perched atop a headstone, Alexandria National Cemetery, Virginia.  
NCA photo by Martin Wright.



Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Matt Quinn discusses cemetery operations with Cemetery Director James Sanders, Quantico National Cemetery, September 29, 2021.  
NCA photo by Martin Wright.

Charlotte Fjelstad visits the grave of her grandfather, Charles Fjelstad, at Black Hills National Cemetery, 2019.  
NCA photo by Martin Wright.



**September 1, 2023 - NCA celebrates 50th anniversary**

**2021** - VLM expands to include State, Territorial and Tribal Veterans cemeteries

**2023** - NCA reaches \$1 billion in grants to state, territorial and tribal Veteran cemeteries

2020

2021

2022

2023





Laura Froelich receives Spirit of Hope award for support of troops.

## Remembering Flag Mama

Two thousand Marines, mostly stationed at Camp Pendleton, turned out to honor Air Force Veteran Laura Froelich when she was laid to rest at Riverside National Cemetery in 2012. Led by the commander of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, Lt. Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, they came to show their respects to the woman affectionately known as "Flag Mama." For ten years from the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, she greeted every flight arriving and leaving out of nearby March Air Force Base. At all hours of the day, she and her fellow volunteers delivered thousands of sandwiches, snacks and hugs, greeting more than 200,000 troops and 4,000 flights.

In 2009, Froelich received the Navy's "Spirit of Bob Hope" award, given to those who exemplify the spirit "Support The Troops." "The troops knew I would be there", she said. And they, in turn, were there for her.





# *Each Time I Cry with the Families*

Gary J. Kunich, Public Affairs Specialist

**Q**uincy McCall slowly walks across a sea of green grass, thousands of white gravestones perfectly parted to the left and right.

"Here she is," she quietly says.  
"Here's Michelle."

Quincy McCall, Cemetery Director, Abraham Lincoln  
and Wood National Cemeteries



McCall comes to Wood National Cemetery on the grounds of a former Soldiers Home that today is called the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, four times a year. She always visits the grave of Iraq Veteran Michelle Witmer—the first Army National Guard woman from Wisconsin ever killed in combat.

“She was my first active duty burial,” McCall says. “She’s like my baby. My own kids were born about that same time.”

McCall is director of the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery in Elwood, Illinois, which oversees Wood and nine other national cemeteries.

She spent four years in the Army and joined NCA in 1998. She was serving at Wood in 2004 when Witmer was killed. The cemetery is closed to new grave sites except for spouses of Veterans buried there and active duty killed in combat.

It was McCall’s job to find Witmer’s final resting place.

“She was so young,” McCall said. “She reminded me of my son who is in the Air Force. As a mother, I realized that could be me on the other side of the casket. As a mother, I never want to see two Air Force people walking to my door, because we know what that means.”

“I saw the pain on her mom’s face. I haven’t experienced that kind of pain on her face, but I feel the pain with them.”

McCall is one of more than 2,200 NCA employees across the U.S. and Puerto Rico who ensure Veterans have a place where loved ones can visit and know they are well taken care of.

“For me, as a Veteran, that is keeping the promise of keeping a dignified shrine and always looking after and taking care of their loved one,” McCall said. “We provide the final benefit.”

VA celebrates the 50th anniversary of NCA, though the history goes back much further. It traces its lineage to 1862 when Congress authorized President Lincoln to buy land to bury Civil War soldiers. There were soon 14 cemeteries, but it wasn’t nearly enough for those killed in battle. More than 50 were built by 1867 and 300,000 Union soldiers were reburied in them across the U.S.

In March 1865, a month before his assassination, Lincoln created a national system of homes for disabled Veterans: the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. The original sprawling, gothic home that served those Veterans—affectionately called Old Main—opened on the Milwaukee campus two years later.

VA established 21 cemeteries at Soldiers Homes and hospitals in the decades following the Civil War. When Congress passed the National Cemeteries Act on Sept. 1, 1973, it transferred 82 Army cemeteries to VA.

Today, VA oversees 155 national cemeteries.

There are 40,000 Veterans and their spouses buried on the grounds of the Wood National Cemetery from every conflict except the Revolutionary War. This includes Buffalo Soldiers and five Medal of Honor recipients.

And Old Main, after going unused and shuttered for more than 30 years, was recently restored as part of a private partnership. It now provides housing for more than 80 formerly homeless Veterans.

Of special note, Milwaukee; Togus, Maine; and Dayton, Ohio, are the three original VA Soldiers Homes and the only three with all three administrations on one campus—medical center, regional benefits office and cemetery.

“They’re like my big brothers,” McCall said of her counterparts in the Veterans Health Administration and Veterans Benefits Administration. “I say that because we’re the smaller agency, but we work together; we do ceremonies together—whether it’s Memorial Day, Veterans Day or another event.

“They treat me like I’m part of the family. We are a family.”

Duane Honeycutt, also an Army Veteran and the Milwaukee VBA regional office director, said that connection is powerful.

“I remember driving here the first time, and the first thing I saw was the cemetery, the rows of gravestones,” he said. “While that’s still in your mind, you see Old Main and you realize what a history this campus has, how many Veterans it served and continues to serve; then you pass the Fisher House and the main hospital, and then my building, which is one of the newer ones on the campus.

“All of that means something.”

And for Daniel Zomchek who served as the Milwaukee VA Medical Center director from 2016 to 2022, it’s more than just a VA family connection.

“It was my mom who reminded me they were buried there,” he said.

Zomchek’s grandfather on his mother’s side, Allen Gahl, served in the Army. He is buried at Wood with his wife, Dorothy.

His grandmother on his father’s side, Anita Zomchek, served in the Women’s Army Corps and is buried there with her husband, Walter.

“Once I put two and two together, it was really meaningful. It just felt right. It was fate or something. That was my first medical center director position; the first time I got to be the head of a health care system. That, in itself, was really impactful.

“It was such an honor,” he said. “And knowing my

grandparents are there—they're only a row or two away from each other—it was really serendipitous."

That point was driven home when he participated in his first Memorial Day event with the other two administrations.



U.S. Army Veteran Allen Gahl

"I didn't truly recognize the power and impact on the mission, and that uniqueness, until that moment—not only the couple hundreds of acres, but the intimate part of the rolling hills with the gravestones. There

are few things in life that draw that kind of meaning. And coupling that with my family connection, the gravity and power of three administrations there, I really internalized that.

"I think something that is so unique about our health care delivery system; how we handle the health care and plethora of services that nobody matches—nobody—and that quality of care is a reminder we are fundamentally incentivized to always do the right thing for our Veterans."

McCall bows her head for a moment at Witmer's grave.

She looks to the sky and blinks back a tear.

"I stand here," she said, "and I just remember that day—the people and that moment. Each time, I cry with the families. I still cry. The day I stop crying is the day I need to retire." ♦



Women's Army Corps Veteran Anita Zomchek



# Reflections of the First Woman Director in the National Cemetery System

Jo Ann Krukar Webb, RN, MHA, FAAN

I was humbled and honored to be appointed by President George H.W. Bush to be the first woman and Vietnam Veteran to head the National Cemetery System. By raising my hand on October 10, 1989, I became the highest-ranking woman in VA.

I was not new to VA. With my nursing and health policy background, I was hired as a career health systems analyst in the Veterans Health Administration out of graduate school. I quickly understood the bureaucracy and was enmeshed in the provision of health services, something that I was trained to do. Cemetery management was very different, but like everything in VA, service to our nation's Veterans was its core business.

Life at the top can be lonely. I was the only woman on the Secretary's executive team and dreaded Monday morning meetings until I learned how to communicate with the "boys." The boys talked about sports. Soon I was following the major teams and could click off the stats and player names. I also had two great VA mentors, Dorothy Starbuck, who was appointed as the Chief Benefits Director in 1977, the first female to head up the Veterans Benefits Branch, and Marjorie "Midge" Quant, a former librarian who became a powerhouse administrator in the VA. Dorothy, well known for her wit and strong language, advised me not to take any nonsense. Midge gave me a copy of the book "The Art of War" by Sun Tzu, a befitting guide on how to engage in conflict and battle within a male-dominated bureaucracy. Both women knew what they were talking about.

It was no secret that I knew nothing about cemetery

management other than the adage that nothing is certain except death and taxes. The National Cemetery System was on the verge of an actuarial crisis—the demand for burial space for the aging "Greatest Generation" who had fought World War II was increasing at a fast pace. This was complicated by the yet-to-be recognized water crisis slowly developing in the West, burial records that existed only on aging paper ledgers, and a president who was elected on the pledge not to raise taxes.

My nursing background made me a fierce advocate for a system that I viewed as my patient. My political inexperience made me think anything was possible. I became an early environmentalist, promoting xeriscaping in the arid southwest cemeteries to save water and the use of flat markers instead of upright marble headstones that shifted and deteriorated in the elements. I was also an early champion of the use of columbaria to keep older landlocked cemeteries open. My greatest joy was realized a few years ago during a visit to Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery in San Diego—the cemetery was closed to in-ground burials, but through the addition of a columbarium along the old cemetery walls, the cemetery remained open until 2014.

During my tenure from 1989 to 1991, I fiercely embraced customer service, requiring that all national cemeteries install answering machines. This addition was met with strong opposition by my cadre of regional directors who were sure they would not receive messages



L to R: Command Master Chief Howard R. Lincoln, JoAnn Krukar Webb, ship's sponsor, Admiral Carlisle A.H. Trost, Chief of Naval Operations, and Senator Charles Robb of Virginia at the commissioning of the USS Abraham Lincoln.

asking for burial assistance but only profanity-laced diatribes from members of the public. The machines were a success and signaled the start of a transformation of a bureaucratic system, showing we had a heart that cared just as much for the living as the dead.

Possibly the most important change that occurred under my watch was the introduction of technology to modernize the over 100-year-old paper registering and tracking system for all national cemeteries. This effort has blossomed into a 21st century system of cemetery maps, grave locating capabilities and direct contact with cemetery staff for timely assistance.

I cried because I did not want to leave. Yes, there was a monstrous learning curve, with disappointments and frustrations. I was offered another job because I was told I had done such a good job that I was needed for another challenge. But looking back on my experiences, it was my favorite job in government. ♦

## Directors and Under Secretaries 1973-1993

Rufus H. Wilson 1974-1975 | John W. Mahan 1975-1977

Carl T. Noll 1977-1981 | Paul T. Bannai 1981-1985

Wilfred L. Ebel 1987-1989 | Jo Ann Krukar Webb 1989-1991

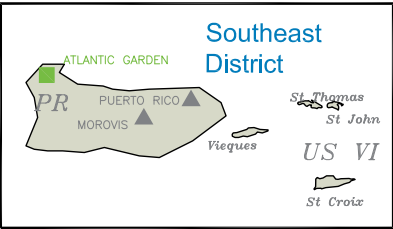
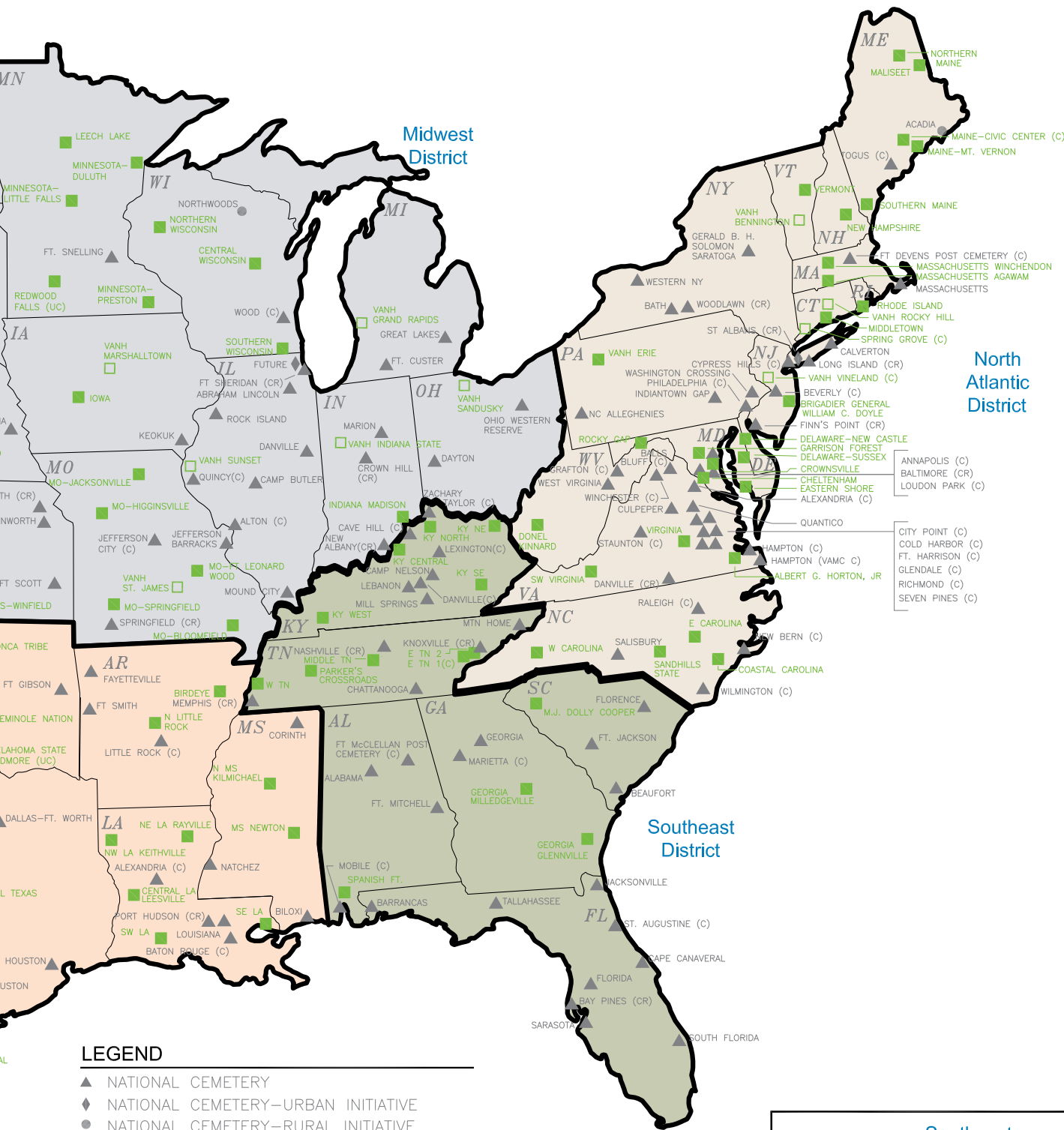
Allen B. Clark, Jr. 1991-1993

## Continental District

Midwest  
District



L VETERANS CEMETERIES



# A Mother's Only Child

James Theres, NCA Public Affairs Specialist

**T**he call came into the Los Angeles National Cemetery from a U.S. Army Casualty Assistance Officer. Sgt. Myles David Penix had been killed on active duty a few days earlier on March 20, 2016. He was 27 years old. The CAO wanted to know if the cemetery had space available for Penix's remains. It did.

"Great," said the officer. "The mother lives near Inglewood and LA is much closer than Riverside National Cemetery." Indeed, it is. Riverside is only 56 miles from Los Angeles, but it can take two hours to get there in typical LA traffic.





The next week, his mother came into the LANC office with her daughter-in-law to start the painful process of burying her only child. Two days later, the cemetery director asked the mother and daughter-in-law if they would like to see the place where he would be laid to rest. The mother nodded yes. The director motioned toward the door and led them toward a golf cart, which staff use to navigate the grounds.

The director turned to a nearby cemetery representative who was coordinating the burial arrangements. "Matt, I want you to come out there with me, okay?"

"Sure," he said. The burial site was located at a peaceful corner spot underneath a large tree near the original LANC columbarium, a brick structure built by the Works Progress Administration in 1940. It is the only indoor columbarium in NCA's inventory.

When they arrived, the director got out and walked to the spot where the headstone would be placed. The mother had not turned to look yet. She had been so strong, but suddenly she could feel the emotion building up inside. She got out, stood up straight and tugged her windbreaker jacket tight. She took a few steps onto the grass near what was to be her son's final resting place. Her daughter-in-law followed behind. They both stopped about six feet away. Matt walked up behind them.

The cemetery director said, "Ma'am, this is the place we chose for your son."

She stared at the spot on the ground as the weight, known only by those who have lost a child, started to feel too heavy to bear. Her only child was dead. She let out a deep gasp and started collapsing to the ground. Matt caught her from behind, the director rushed forward. No words were spoken. The four of them hugged and cried for several minutes.

More than a hundred people showed up at the Bob Hope Memorial Chapel to honor Penix. His gravesite was prepared; it had been dug the day before. His 82<sup>nd</sup> Combat Aviation Brigade commander, command sergeant major and members of his squad attended along with family from all over the country. Several spoke about how much they would miss Penix and how kind he was. Members of his squad reminded those in attendance what makes being a soldier unique. They talked about his success as a leader of young men. How he had earned their respect through the sharing of similar dire circumstances that create a brotherhood. And the funny stories...oh, the stories our military men and women tell. Bagpipes played; people wept. The LANC staff remained stoic as best as they could under such circumstances.

It was tragic that a man, a father, a son and a nation's defender had died so young. As the committal service ended, temporary relief came over family and friends. It was done. In a few minutes, Penix's casket would be lowered into the ground.

But no one was ready for what happened next. Penix had a young son, maybe four or five years old. He broke away from his grandmother's arms and rushed up to the casket. Placing his hands on the casket, he said, "Daddy, wake up; it's time to go home."

Seven years later, his mother visits his gravesite almost every Sunday after church. He was her only child. The words on his headstone read, "Big Smile, Bigger Heart." ♦

*Editor's note: James Theres served as the acting director of Los Angeles National Cemetery Jan. - May 2016.*



Sgt. Myles Penix, U.S. Army Airborne School, Fort Benning, Georgia



# Veterans Legacy Program

## Local Legacy, National Heritage

Jimmy Price, Education Specialist and Kenneth Holliday, Program Specialist



Grafton, W. Virginia high school students at the Veterans Memorial in Charleston, WV

**I**n one tragic day, the Lewellyn's parents lost two sons, two wives lost their husbands and three children lost their fathers," wrote students from Grafton High School about twin brothers that died aboard the USS Bunker Hill in World War II. "Despite this tragedy," they wrote, "The heroic service of Charles and William Lewellyn ensures the legacies of men and women like them live on."

The story of the Lewellyn brothers is just one of thousands discovered through the NCA's Veterans Legacy Program. The nationwide program encourages students to learn about the Veterans interred in their local national cemeteries. In 2023, VLP awarded a grant to the West Virginia Humanities Council to lead students and teachers in discovering the stories of Veterans in West Virginia National Cemetery, where the Lewellyn twins each have a memorial marker. When students discovered two markers next to one another shared the same last name and date of death, they embarked on learning who they were. Weeks later, they shared their discoveries during a community event and presented a biography that will ensure the legacies of the Lewellyns are not forgotten.

**Rather than focus on notable burials and high-ranking officers, VLP directs its research toward the common service member—the hometown heroes who spent time in uniform and then came back to become pillars of their local communities.**

On Memorial Day 2016, NCA established VLP to fulfill its mission to memorialize Veterans in perpetuity. VLP was tasked with reaching out to K-12 schools, colleges and universities, and other cultural institutions to engage students, educators and the American public with their own local history through researching the diversity of the Veteran experience and sharing that research with the wider community.

Rather than focus on notable burials and high-ranking officers, VLP directs its research toward the common service member—the hometown heroes who spent time in uniform and then came back to become pillars of their



local communities. VLP's mandate is to tell the stories of those interred in national cemeteries with a special focus on underrepresented Veterans whose stories have not been told due to their race, ethnic background or identity, from any period in American history.

VLP has always sought to be an interdisciplinary endeavor, and early efforts with the film school at San Francisco State University and the graphic novel academy at Black Hills State University demonstrate a Veteran's story can be memorialized in many ways, not just with words on a page. Programs funded by VLP have incorporated geographic information systems to create virtual tours of cemeteries and interactive story maps that chart the course of a Veteran's life and service. In 2021, VLP launched its own social media account to showcase resources and materials and to share new service member profiles.

Another milestone was reached with the launch of the Veterans Legacy Grant Program (VLGP) in fiscal year 2020. VLGP was created to fund projects for cemetery research related to national, state or tribal Veterans cemeteries, the production of educational materials, and the promotion of community engagement activities. Prior to the

establishment of VLGP, contracts were the main fiscal instrument for funding legacy projects. VLGP awarded six grants in its inaugural year and is excited to expand upon that in future grant cycles.

To date, VLP has funded more than 30 programs. These programs have engaged nearly 15,000 students of all levels and produced over 2,500 Veteran biographies, 50 documentary videos and over 100 lesson plans.

The work conducted during a VLP project always becomes very personal for those involved. One college student who participated in the program remarked, "Their lives, struggles, joys and pains were just as important and real as anybody else's. This history mattered." A professor echoed this sentiment when she stated, "I have had students say to me things like, 'I brought someone who had been forgotten in life and in death back to life.'"

As VLP continues to grow, the program remains committed to its core mission of empowering communities of young learners to see themselves as agents of their own history: researching, writing and sharing local history through the diversity of the Veteran experience, past and present. ♦

University of Denver

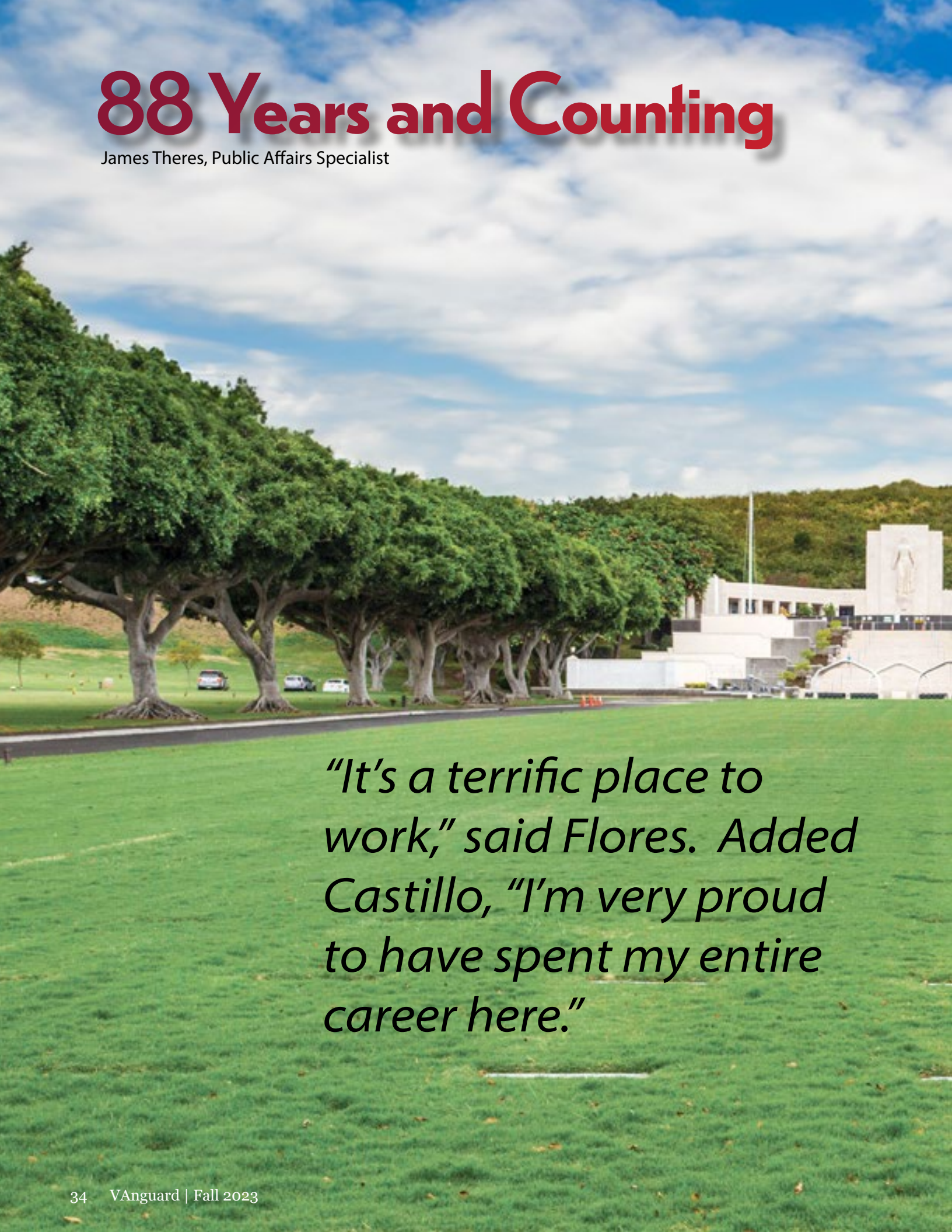


The University of Denver and Veterans Legacy Program's "More Than a Headstone" student-created exhibit tells the stories of Veterans interred at Ft. Logan National Cemetery in Denver



# 88 Years and Counting

James Theres, Public Affairs Specialist



*"It's a terrific place to work," said Flores. Added Castillo, "I'm very proud to have spent my entire career here."*





Joe Flores, U.S. Army



Donn Castillo, U.S. Army



Joseph Flores, 78, and Donn Castillo, 69, show up for work each weekday around 6:30 a.m. at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii, to prepare for the morning meeting that starts an hour later. Flores, a maintenance leader, and Castillo, a work team leader, review work assignments, interment schedules and drink a little coffee to start the day. Combined they have 88 years of federal service, all at this same national shrine.

Few cemeteries can compete with the natural beauty of NMCP, also known as the "Punchbowl." The Punchbowl rests in the crater of an extinct volcano that rose out of the Pacific Ocean 75,000 to 100,000 years ago. The first burial was made on Jan. 4, 1949. Over 66,000 Veterans and family members are interred there, including 37 Medal of Honor recipients. Perhaps the most famous of all the Punchbowl's residents is

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and war correspondent Ernie Pyle, whose dispatches from the front brought the brutal realities of war to the newspapers and magazines of millions of Americans before he himself was killed by a Japanese bullet in 1945.

In 1964 the American Battle Monuments Commission erected the Honolulu Memorial at the Punchbowl "to honor the sacrifices and achievements of American Armed Forces in the Pacific during World War II and in the Korean War." The memorial was later expanded to include the Vietnam War. The names of 28,788 military personnel who are missing in action or were lost or buried at sea in the Pacific are listed on ten marble slabs known as the Courts of the Missing.

"It's a terrific place to work," said Flores. Added Castillo, "I'm very proud to have spent my entire career here."

## Similar Backgrounds, Similar Stories

Castillo was born and raised in Kaneohe on the windward side of the island of Oahu. He was an Army communication specialist serving in Germany from 1971 to 1974. Castillo has been married to his wife, Cindy, for 50 years and has been working at the Punchbowl for 47 of those years.

Flores was born in Guam and enlisted in the U.S. Army from there. He served as a mortarman in the 101st Airborne from 1965 to 1970 with one tour in Vietnam, serving at Phu Bai in 1969. After discharge from the military in Hawaii, he never left. He married his wife, Zara, in 1971. They have been married for 52 years. He has been at the Punchbowl for 41 years.

Both men have similar post-military stories, too. Their federal careers began as temporary assignments. Castillo remembers earning \$4.41 per hour when he started full time in 1975. Flores came on board as a Wage Grade 3 employee in 1982.

## A Typical Day – and a Very Special One

On a typical day Flores can be found along the memorial walk refurbishing memorial monuments or at the administration building conducting preventative maintenance on the generator or building a retaining wall behind the maintenance complex. Flores's duties are varied, but provide a significant impact to cemetery operations.

"We've hosted presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, the president of South Korea, and the Emperor and Empress of Japan," said Flores.

Both men say the burial they remember the most was that of Ellison Onizuka, the first Asian American astronaut in space. He was a United States Air Force flight test engineer who died in the in-



Memorial Day Celebration at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific "Punchbowl"





Funeral procession of Astronaut Ellison Onizuka



Astronaut Ellison Onizuka

flight explosion of the space shuttle Challenger on January 28, 1986. Born in Hawaii, Onizuka is revered as "Hawaii's Astronaut."

Castillo and Flores placed red carpet, erected tents and meticulously prepared the cemetery for his interment. They had the privilege of caring for Onizuka's casket. He is interred four graves over from Ernie Pyle and is surrounded by other Japanese American soldiers from WWII, soldiers from the 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team among others. Thousands of visitors stop at Onizuka's gravesite leaving leis and bouquets of flowers.

### Changes over 40 years

The biggest changes to cemetery operations Castillo and Flores recall were the introduction of columbaria in 1982 and watching the Punchbowl grow into a popular tourist destination. Columbaria are outdoor structures, inspired by the Romans, used to inter urns with cremated remains. White, marble niche covers, like in-ground headstones, face outward on each columbarium wall, and list the names, dates of birth and death of those whose ashes rest in each niche, as well as an emblem of belief and a term of endearment.

Over the years, the Punchbowl has become a tourist destination, much like the USS Arizona, sunk on December 7, 1941. More than five million people visit each year to pay respects to the dead and take in the panoramic view of the cemetery and Oahu.

Another big change was the installation of an irrigation system. "We used to hose the grounds all day," remembered Castillo.

One thing that has not changed in 40 years is Castillo's and Flores' dedication and the feeling of a job well done at the end of each day. Their advice to new employees is to be courteous and respectful, take pride in your work and to take care of the Veterans and their families above all.

"They're an inspiration to us all," said public affairs officer Gene Maestas about Flores and Castillo. "They're role models to look up to. Never late, always here. They're old school. Believe in hard work."

One day the time will come to retire. Castillo thinks maybe in two or three years. Flores is thinking even longer. "As long as my body holds up, I'll be here." ♦

# Two Burials, Same Dedication

Larry Provost, NCA Outreach Officer

Working as the outreach officer is a most fulfilling personal and professional mission. Each story from Veterans and their loved ones is unique and personal. Veterans earn many benefits through their military service, including final benefits facilitated by NCA. These burial and memorial benefits help Veterans leave a financial legacy, a legacy of peace and a legacy of eternal memorialization for their loved ones. My travels have taken me to conventions of Veterans organizations, civic groups and many other entities, as well as many of our 155 national cemeteries. One story stands out as to why NCA is so important.

## On Behalf of a Grateful Nation

In 2021, I observed two committal services at Quantico National Cemetery. The first service was for a retired FBI agent who was an Army Veteran. At this first service, the FBI agent and Veteran was seen off by 200 of his colleagues, as well as many family members. The large gathering stood at attention or placed their hands over their hearts as Taps played. A few Veterans in the crowd, many years removed from their military service, rendered a sharp hand salute. Everyone watched the somber and precise folding of the flag. Tears flowed as the flag was presented on behalf of a grateful nation to the widow.

Upon a family's request, the military is required by law to provide

every eligible Veteran a minimum two-person detail who perform the key elements of military funeral honors: the playing of Taps, and the folding and presentation of the American flag.

There is a specific protocol for flag placement and flag presentation. The flag is draped on a closed casket, so the blue field is at the head and over the left shoulder of the deceased. When an urn is used, the flag is already in a military fold. A member of the honor guard carries the folded flag and, once the urn comes to a rest, places it to the right of the urn. The bugler then plays Taps, or a recording is used if no bugler is available. Afterwards, the honor guard unfolds the flag and displays it over the cremated remains. Then the flag is refolded and presented to the next of kin.

The second service that day was also for an Army Veteran, who sadly had no family or friends in attendance. It would have been very easy for the military honor guard and cemetery staff to slack off on their duties. But like the first ceremony, Taps echoed across the cemetery's fields, and the flag was folded with the same somber precision. This time the honor guard presented the burial flag to the cemetery director who acted as the next of kin for the Veteran.

## Cemetery Staff has Significant Responsibilities

In the case of both interments, I saw the cemetery staff perform their duties the exact same way, always maintaining the greatest sense of dignity before, during and after the 30 minute committal service. A lot goes on behind the scenes that families never see. After coordinating



Photo by Les Melnyk

Outreach Officer, Larry Provost, speaks with an active-duty soldier at an outreach event at the National Mall.





Marine plays Taps during a burial

with the next of kin to arrange date, time, and military honors, the grounds crew probes the site to verify the proper depth of the burial. In newer cemeteries, pre-placed concrete crypts or vaults eliminate the need for probing in advance, but graves in either case must be excavated with heavy machinery. Even burial in a pre-placed concrete vault requires the removal of 2 to 3 feet of soil that rests on top of the vault's heavy concrete lid.

On the day of the interment, the casket or urn arrives at the cemetery with the family for the committal service. After the committal service – but always on the same day – cemetery caretakers transport the casket or urn to the burial site. Urns can be interred in a columbarium niche, or in small and relatively shallow in-ground plots. Caskets require significantly more work to inter. Once the burial site has been excavated or the vault opened, the casket is placed on a special device designed to carefully lower it into the ground or the vault without doing any damage to the casket.

If burial takes place in a vault, the vault lid is moved into place

by heavy machinery before being covered by dirt, which is tamped down multiple times before seed or sod is placed over top. For burial in the ground, the casket is covered with gravel to maximize compaction. Then the grounds crew apply two levels of soil and use tamping equipment to pack the soil and gravel. Sod is placed over the gravesite and caretakers place a temporary grave marker until the permanent marker is

## Two Burials, Same Dedication

received, normally within 30 days. Next of kin is notified once the permanent marker has been placed over the gravesite.

## Only One Chance to Get It Right

One of the values of NCA is equality, and this is displayed in how we maintain every Veteran's grave the same, regardless of the Veteran's status or rank in life or how many people attended the Veteran's committal service. NCA's staff has the highest percentage of Veterans in any agency of the federal government, nearly 70%, and you will often hear these employees say that they treat the families of the Veterans they inter the same way they want their families to be treated when it is their turn to be buried at a national cemetery. But truth be told, in my experience every NCA employee, regardless of whether they served in the military, takes their obligation to Veterans and their loved ones very seriously.

In the movie "Patton," Gen. George S. Patton says, "Our graves aren't going anywhere." We at NCA only have one chance to get it right and that obligation rests not only at committal but in perpetuity. ♦



Air Force Honor Guard carries an urn and folded flag during burial

# Cemetery Director Development Program

## Nurturing Future Leaders in Cemetery Management

Charles "Rudy" Arnold, Supervisory Training Specialist



National Training Center CDDP Class of 2023  
David Beaver, Rodney Heard, Marcos De Jesus De Jesus,  
Anthony Ramos, Richard Muñoz, Daniel Enamorado



The National Cemetery Administration has long provided dignified burial services and commemorated the service and sacrifice of America's Veterans. To ensure this mission continues to be fulfilled in the most professional and compassionate manner, NCA started the year-long Cemetery Director Development Program to prepare the next generation of cemetery directors with the skills, knowledge and acumen to lead national cemeteries across the United States.

CDDP is a comprehensive, structured initiative designed to train aspiring cemetery directors in all aspects of cemetery management. The program incorporates both academic and practical elements to provide participants with a thorough understanding of NCA's policies, procedures and best practices. This immersive experience prepares individuals to take on the crucial responsibility of serving as stewards of national cemeteries.

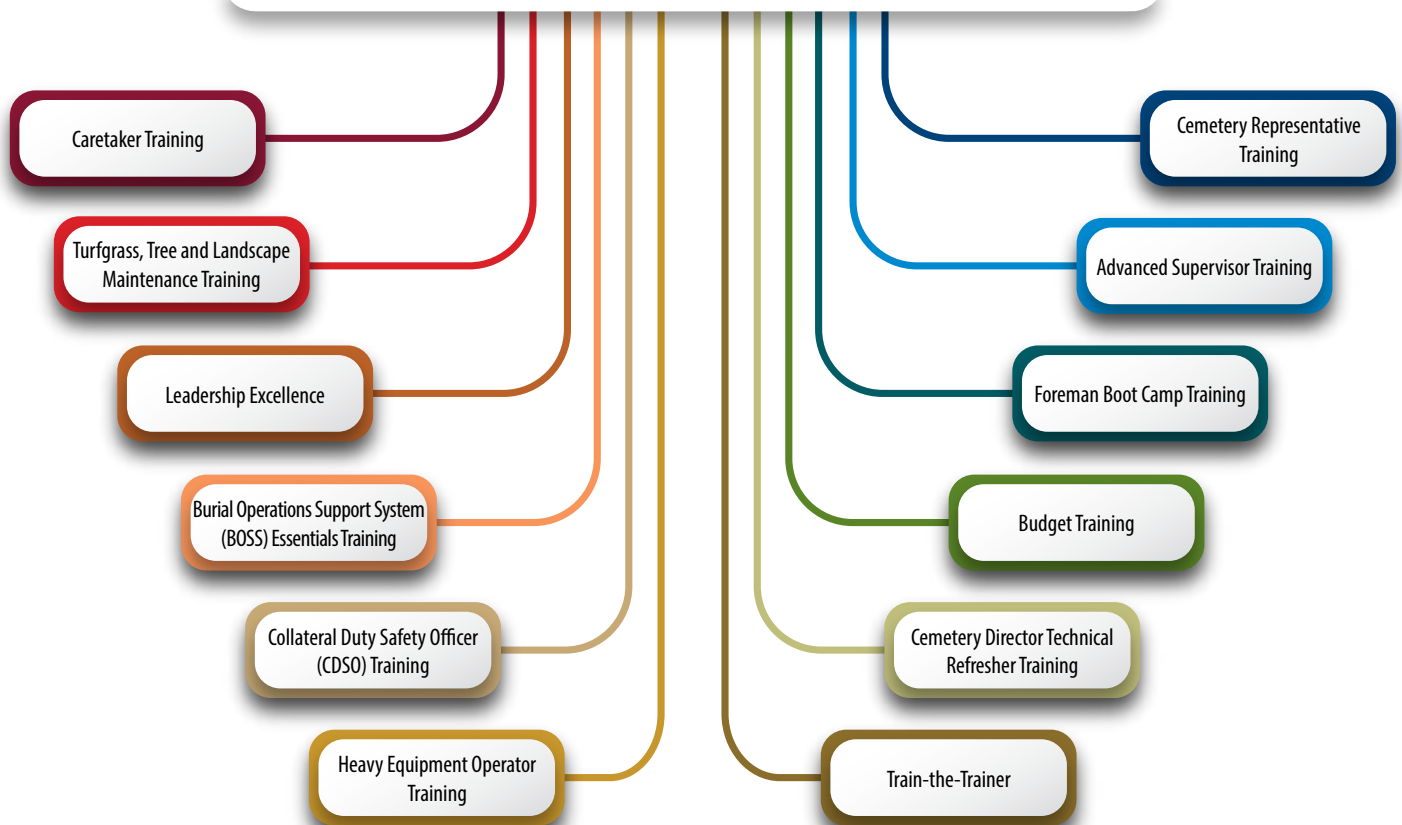
A key aspect of CDDP is its rigorous selection process. CDDP is open to members of the public as well as federal employees. Applicants apply through USA Jobs and must undergo a competitive evaluation, which includes an assessment of their educational background, work experience and leadership potential. This rigor ensures that only the most promising candidates are chosen to participate in the program.

"The Cemetery Director Development Program has been the best thing to happen to me since my career on submarines," said Kirk Leopard, Executive Director of Sarasota National Cemetery in Florida. "I graduated CDDP in 2006. The year I was selected there were over 400 applicants. We had 10 people in my class. I felt like I'd won the lottery."

During their time in the program, participants study a wide range of topics, including burial operations, facility management, budgeting and strategic planning. CDDP also places a strong emphasis on developing leadership skills, as well as fostering a deep understanding of NCA's commitment to maintaining high standards of service and honoring the memory of America's Veterans.

"It was a very busy year and the amount of learning required surprised me," said Leopard. "When we graduated, we had a toolbox, but we didn't have all the tools. That came with time, experience and some sage words of advice from my mentor, Ken Rolene."

- Over 8,200 employees trained in the below courses.
- 1400 in Caretaker Training and over 1100 in Cemetery Representative Training.
- Over 700 participants trained from Department of the Army, American Battle Monuments Commission, VA-funded state & tribal cemeteries and National Park Service.



To provide the most immersive learning experience possible, CDDP partners with NCA facilities across the country. This hands-on approach allows participants to experience the daily challenges faced by cemetery directors and their teams. Program participants benefit from the guidance and mentorship of experienced cemetery directors, who offer invaluable insights and support throughout the training process.

"During my year as an intern, I formed strong, professional relationships that have supported me throughout these past eight years," said Celethia Reed, Assistant Director at Houston National Cemetery and a 2015 CDDP graduate. "I learned the importance of 'leading from the front' and 'servant leadership.' Having the unique experience of immersive education prepared me for the range of people, facilities, locations and equipment I would encounter throughout the National Cemetery Administration."

Upon successful completion of CDDP, graduates are well equipped to assume leadership roles within NCA. They possess the knowledge, skills and experience needed to ensure that national cemeteries continue to operate at the highest standards, providing a fitting tribute to the brave men and women who have served their country.

"There's something to be said about an organization that shows a direct path from a temporary Cemetery Representative to Cemetery Administrator," added Reed. "This experience has been invaluable to not only myself, but my family as well."

CDDP represents NCA's commitment to preserving the legacy of America's Veterans through the professional development of future cemetery directors. By investing in the training and growth of these dedicated individuals, NCA ensures that the memory of our nation's heroes is honored and respected for generations to come. Since the inception of CDDP in 2006, 158 applicants have graduated and 84 (53%) are still with NCA in some capacity, 58 (37%) as cemetery directors.

"We are ALWAYS 'on stage,'" said Leopard. "Cemetery directors must have the trust of those we serve. The old saying, 'people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care' is the best example I can think of to explain how important trust is in your relationship with the local community. We own our mistakes...that's one thing that really impressed me about NCA." ♦





# The Story Behind the Photo

In Summer 2018, Mikayla Wiener, daughter of U.S. Navy Corpsman Jeffrey “Doc” Wiener, visited her father’s gravesite at Calverton National Cemetery to show him her high school diploma. Wiener was killed in action in Iraq on May 7, 2005. Mikayla was five years old at the time of her father’s passing. Her younger sister, Theodora, was three.

Mikayla also made an Instagram post with her father that read, “13 years ago we lost you. I know that all you would want for us is to be happy and live our best lives. We’re doing it, Dad, and it’s all for you.” The social media post went viral receiving thousands of reactions and comments.

Jeffery Wiener was a volunteer firefighter, EMS and medic with the Nassau County Police Department and later the Jefferson County EMS in Kentucky. Inspired by the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, he joined the Naval Reserve in 2002, then took special training to become a Navy corpsman attached to a Marine unit. A petty officer third class, he deployed to Iraq with 3rd Battalion, 25th Marines in 2005. He was killed on May 7, 2005, in an ambush and bombing in Haditha, Iraq, during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Some tributes taken from the Fallen Heroes website on the anniversary of his death:

“Jeff. . . 15 years man . . . the image still so clear when Doc Colson came into the room in the middle of the night saying you had been hurt. I still think of you often, more than just this day. . . I will never forget. As long as I live, you all live. . . Until the next time.”

Then Sergeant, now Major DJS, USMC, USA

“Wiener, we had an appointment when we rotated back to the world. Doc Cleveland and I will keep it for ya. Take care brother, see you on the roof.”

HM3 Alunni, James R. of Haditha, Iraq

“My son, a Marine, had spoken to me about “Doc” long before 3/25 headed to Iraq. Jeff had been working with him to give him additional training (on his own time) in combat first responder first aid. . . Jeff meant so much to the Marines—they considered him ‘one of their own!’”

Linda of NY, USA

“Your loss has shifted my world. . . I can only hope you are looking down on those who struggle with your loss. When I hear the word hero, you are what comes to mind. No one was more Marine than you.”

MB of Buffalo, NY

*Mikayla Wiener is currently a graduate student in Kentucky.*



Mikayla Wiener visits her father's grave at Calverton National Cemetery.  
Photo by Maria Wiener



# Memorialization in the Digital Age – Veterans Legacy Memorial

James LaPaglia, Digital Services Officer

During its first year under VA, exactly 50 years ago, the cemeteries of the National Cemetery System interred more than 26,000 Veterans. Compare that to nearly 96,000 Veterans interred in 2022 and one can see the huge increase, not just in pure volume, but what that volume represents. Each Veteran leaves behind family members, friends and colleagues who remember these Veterans' lives and stories.

Until recently, Americans who wanted to visit their Veteran had to physically go to a cemetery. If they wanted to tell their Veteran's story, there was the newspaper obituary, perhaps a shadow box with a flag hanging in the house, photo albums and probably a box of military documents and memorabilia. People have always talked about their Veterans, but 50 years ago it may have been around the card table, at a church social, at a Memorial Day or Veterans Day event, or a family gathering.

NCA now offers the Veterans Legacy Memorial to those who want to keep the memory of their Veterans alive. Launched in 2019, VLM is an interactive online platform comprised of more than 4.85 million individual

Veteran profile pages. These pages display military information (service branch, rank, war period, decorations) and resting place details (cemetery name, clickable map, gravesite, interment date) and allow family members, friends and others to upload a variety of content. People can submit tributes, biographies, photos and documents; create a word cloud that describes a Veteran and develop a timeline of military and personal achievements. To date, more than 60,000 pieces of content live forever on Veteran pages.

## Veteran Tributes on VLM

VLM complements the physical cemetery experience. Loved ones can still visit Veterans in the solitude of these solemn spaces, but it takes the memorialization experience beyond the confines of cemetery walls to a worldwide audience who can help create and sustain the legacy of these American patriots in perpetuity.

The VLM profile of 6888<sup>th</sup> Central Postal Directory Battalion Veteran Deloris Ruddock is a perfect example of the power to heal and recognize a loved one in digital perpetuity. Ruddock, 97, died on March 27, 2021, and was laid to rest at Baltimore National

Cemetery. Her death gained national attention because her unit, known as the "SixTripleEight," was being considered for the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian award. (Note: President Biden signed the SixTripleEight Congressional Gold Medal Act of 2021 into law on March 22, 2022, one year after Ruddock passed.)

VA Secretary Denis McDonough spoke at her committal honoring her life and service. He wrote on her VLM page, *"On April 20, at Baltimore National Cemetery, I was humbled and honored to join Patricia Helldorn as her mother was laid to rest in that hallowed ground . . . Deloris's story is the story of Black women fighting for inclusion and the right to serve . . ."*

Vietnam Veteran Gary Williams wrote on Air Force radio disc jockey Adrian Cronauer's page, *"I was a Marine grunt in Vietnam, 1966 to 1967, and we rarely had radios in the field that we could listen to. But a few times while in our base camp I heard Adrian's classic 'GOOOOOOD Morning VIETNAM' greeting! God bless you, Adrian Cronauer."*

Joy Howell's tribute honored her grandfather, Ira Boydon: *"Grandpa, I could not imagine the struggles you went through to be a proud, black man . . . how you told me to respect the written word, my elders, and the sacrifice of my ancestors. Rest in peace your legacy goes on."*

Nancy Ferruggio shared an emotional tribute to her husband, Salvatore: *"Losing a husband as special as you – has left my heart aching it's broken in two. No words can describe all the grief and the pain – I'd give all I have just to see you again. But you're with the angels and for now I can wait – For we'll meet again dear beside heaven's gate. Your Nancy."*



During a visit to Fayetteville National Cemetery in Arkansas, Secretary McDonough stops to visit a gravesite after noticing the Veteran and his wife had the same date of death. James Swearingen served 12 years in the Army, leaving as a sergeant first class. Swearingen and his wife, Lori, were killed in 2010 in a motorcycle crash.

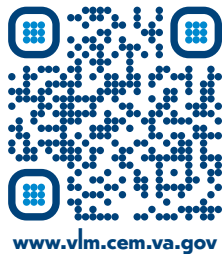


Iraq Veteran James Swearingen's mother, Jannie, shared this tribute about her only son, who was killed in a motorcycle accident in April 2010.

*"This is my only child. All he ever wanted to do was serve. He was serving when he was killed. Not active duty, but as a disabled Veteran. He was an amazing Godly man, an amazing son and soldier. A great leader who only wanted to do what was best by those he served with. He is missed with every beat of my heart and every breath I take. He was a soldier's soldier and a Momma's favorite and only son."*

### Find a Veteran, Post a Tribute

To find a Veteran's profile page, first go to the VLM site by using the QR code here or typing in the URL just below the code. Then enter the Veteran's name (first and last with no commas). There is an option to refine the search by using drop-down menus by Branch of Service, War Period, and Cemetery Location. There is also an Advanced Search option.



[www.vlm.cem.va.gov](http://www.vlm.cem.va.gov)

### Award-Winning Website

Initially including only Veterans interred in VA National Cemeteries, the platform now includes Veterans from VA-funded state, tribal and territory Veteran cemeteries, Department of Defense-managed cemeteries (including Arlington National Cemetery) and two U.S. Park Service national cemeteries.

In 2022, VLM received four awards for excellence:

- Gold Quill of Excellence Award from the International Association of Business Communicators
- Digital Government Experience Award from Granicus,

- Innovation Award from FedHealthIT,
- Customer Service (CX) Innovation Award from VA.

VLM continues to expand.

Recently, more than 300,000 pages from 27 military cemeteries joined the site, of which 259,000 are from Arlington National Cemetery. VLM now has over 4.85 million Veteran pages. Over Memorial

Day weekend, visitors posted more than 5,100 submissions—the highest number since VLM's inception. The program's goal is to eventually have a VLM page for all Veterans, no matter their final resting place. Each one has a story. ♦

Deloris Ruddock served in the Army's 6888<sup>th</sup> Central Postal Directory Battalion, also known as "Six Triple Eight." In this image, she appears in a VA advertising campaign aimed at drawing attention to women Veterans.



### Once on a Veteran's page, users can:

- post as a guest or log in as a registered VLM user using an ID.me account,
- post a Tribute or comment,
- submit photos/captions with tributes or as standalone images,
- post longer-length biographical summaries of a Veteran's life,
- submit historical documents such as award citations, letters and newspaper clippings,
- generate a word cloud to describe the Veteran,
- create a milestone of military and personal achievements,
- follow a Veteran's page and receive email alerts when new content is posted.



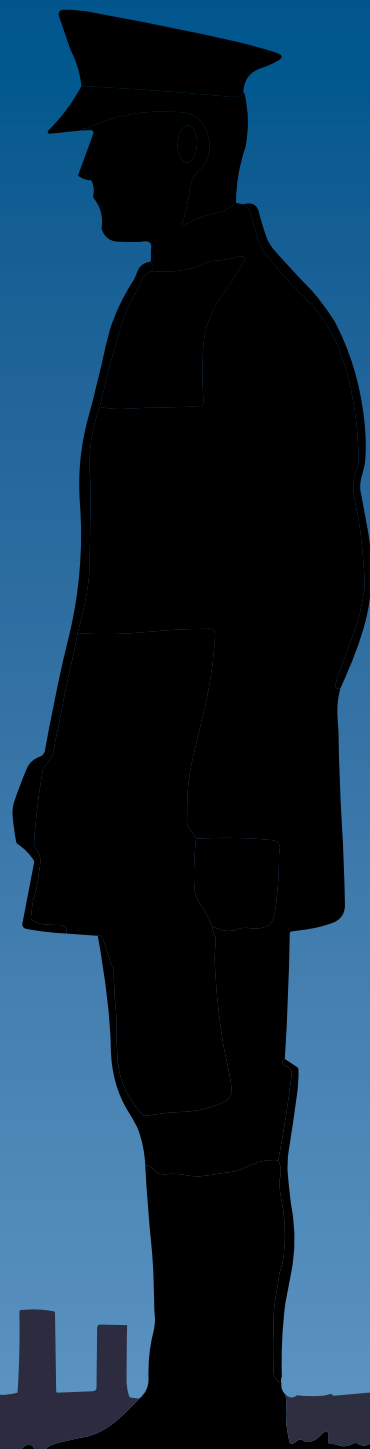
Veterans Legacy Memorial is an online memorial to honor more than 4.5 million Veterans interred in VA National Cemeteries, VA grant-funded Veterans' cemeteries and DoD military cemeteries.

# Working Together to Honor Our Nation's Heroes

## Over \$1 billion in grants since 1980

Les' Melnyk, Chief, NCA History

**O**ne of the defining characteristics of VA's stewardship of our national cemeteries these past 50 years has been the focus on expanding access to burial and memorial benefits for Veterans living in every corner of the United States. And nothing VA has done shows this more clearly than the fantastic partnership between states, tribes and territories in the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program.





When national cemeteries were first established during the Civil War, they were owned by the Army and intended for the burial of those who died from battle, disease or injury. But over time, burial eligibility expanded—first to indigent Veterans, then later to all Veterans, and subsequently to their spouses and dependent children as well.

While eligibility expanded to more Veterans, the number of cemeteries where they could take advantage of this benefit did not keep pace. Most national cemeteries were located either at Civil War battlefields or were expansions of military post cemeteries. The number of Veterans eligible for burial in a national cemetery following World War I forced the first expansion of the Army's cemetery system since the Civil War. Pressure from Congress compelled the Army to work with the Veterans Administration to identify where Veterans lived, and seven cemeteries were established in these areas in the interwar era. Some were new expansions of existing military cemeteries. But these limited efforts still left millions without a nearby Veterans burial option.

With the signing of the National Cemeteries Act of 1973, VA became the administrator for 103 national cemeteries—82 previously run by the Army joined 21 cemeteries VA already administered at hospitals and homes for Veterans with disabilities. Congress directed VA to study the criteria for operating these cemeteries for coming generations of Veterans, a study VA completed in 1974.

In addition to recommending construction of new national cemeteries near the largest populations of Veterans, the study also recommended the creation of a federal grant program to encourage states to build and expand state-run Veterans cemeteries. The State Cemetery Grants Program began in 1978, solicited its first grant submissions the following year and awarded its first grant in 1980 for repairs and expansion at Maryland's Eastern Shore Veterans Cemetery. The program was later renamed the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program.

The goal of VCGP is to assist states in establishing, expanding or improving state Veterans cemeteries in areas not served by a national cemetery. Grants were originally awarded on a 50/50 federal and state matching basis. With the passage of additional legislation in 1998, the federal government was permitted to fund a greater percentage of construction—up to the full cost of a project. The cemeteries had to be built according to federal guidelines and be operated solely for the interment of Veterans. States, territories and tribes pay for the daily administration, operation and maintenance of these cemeteries, though they receive a plot allowance from VA (currently set at \$893) for every Veteran who is interred in their cemeteries to help offset costs.

From its very start, VCGP was designed to be a collaborative program where the federal and state governments would jointly improve access to burial benefits for Veterans. Beginning in the 1970s, VA's National Cemetery System (after 1998, known as the

**Native Americans serve in the military in numbers far higher than their proportion of the U.S. population – five times the national average. To recognize their legacy of service, NCA works with tribes to honor their culture and heritage.**

Rosebud Sioux Committal Shelter  
Photo by Ed Saunders



National Cemetery Administration) began building new national cemeteries in areas with the largest concentrations of Veterans who did not already have a national cemetery nearby. But even with a significant increase in the number of new national cemeteries, there were still many gaps where Veterans lacked a nearby cemetery. VA grants to states, territories and tribes helped provide that coverage in areas without a sufficient density of Veterans to warrant construction of a large national cemetery.

Native Americans serve in the military in numbers far higher than their proportion of the U.S. population – five times the national average. To recognize their legacy of service, NCA works with tribes to honor their culture and heritage.

The Sicangu Akicita Owicahé Tribal Veterans Cemetery on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota was one of the first VA-funded tribal Veteran cemeteries. Completed in 2013, the cemetery is built in the shape of a turtle, a symbol of life, longevity and fortitude in the Lakota culture.

At the Seminole Nation and Veterans Memorial in Oklahoma, the flag assembly area has a cultural walk with signs showing Seminole symbols for warrior, honor and valor. The newest tribal Veterans cemetery, the Metlakatla Veterans Memorial Cemetery, stands on the only Indian reserve in the state of Alaska near Ketchikan. Today, there are 14 VA-funded cemeteries built and operated by tribes on tribal trust land.

“Incorporating these cultural elements goes beyond honoring their departed Veterans,” said George Eisenbach, a former director of Veterans Cemetery Grants Program. “They’re preserving their heritage for future generations.”

To say that the program has been a remarkable success would be an understatement. In 45 years, VA



Photo by Kandi McElhannon

Two totem poles depicting Metlakatla warriors stand guard near the flag assembly area at the Metlakatla Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Alaska.

has provided 475 grants to 122 state, territorial and tribal Veterans cemeteries. The 475th grant, made in March 2023 to the North Dakota Veterans Cemetery in North Dakota, increased the total amount awarded by VA since 1980 to just over \$1 billion. And since that time, more than 800,000 Veterans and family members have been interred in VA grant-funded cemeteries. By comparison, since 1980, VA national cemeteries have conducted about 3.75 million burials.

This year, 45 years after the program was established, VA Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Matt Quinn noted, “I truly believe there is no better example of partnership between the federal government and the state, territories and tribes than the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program. We are proud to work together to honor our nation’s heroes.”

VCGP is vital to ensuring that NCA achieves its strategic goal of providing reasonable access to a Veteran’s burial benefit for 95% of all Veterans living in the U.S. Reasonable access is defined as being within 75 miles of where a Veteran lives.

Today, nearly 94% of Veterans live within 75 miles of a national, state, territorial or tribal Veterans cemetery. But if only national cemeteries were considered, that number would drop to just 77%.

That difference means everything to Veterans and families who want the beauty, dignity and honor found in those rows of perfectly aligned, pristine white

headstones—but also want their loved one’s final resting place to be close to home. Because VA has worked closely with states, territories and tribes for the past 45 years, most Veterans do not have to choose between those two things. They can have both. ♦



Sailors carry the remains of S1C Billy Turner in preparation for his interment at the Seaman First Class Billy Turner Veterans Cemetery in Ardmore, Oklahoma. Turner was killed aboard the USS Oklahoma during the attack on Pearl Harbor. His remains were unidentified until 2021 and he was the first service member interred in the new VA-funded State Veterans cemetery on June 4, 2023.



Turner’s military awards on display during his committal service. Photos by Gerardo Avila



# One Common Purpose: Honoring and Remembering Our Nation's Heroes

Lisa Hollenbeck, NCA Digital Services Specialist

**N**CA honors Veterans and their families with final resting places in national shrines and with lasting tributes that commemorate their service and sacrifice to our nation. To assist in this mission, NCA has partnered with non-profit organizations that share this vision and aspire to give something back to those who have volunteered to defend our country.

## Saluting Branches

Saluting Branches, a nonprofit group of arborists, gardeners, community volunteers and tree care companies, approached NCA with a unique idea. The group wanted to support our Veterans by helping to make their final resting places safe and beautiful. Volunteers donate their time, talent and equipment for an entire day in September each year, often removing hazardous dead branches from the majestic trees which grace so many of our national cemeteries. Founded in 2015, in Minnetonka, Minnesota, thousands of volunteers, aided by corporate sponsors in the industry, have joined together to donate millions of dollars in services at national cemeteries across the country.

## Memorial Day National Relay

It has been six years since NCA formed a partnership with Carry The Load. Founded by two Veteran Navy SEALs, the Dallas-based nonprofit started with a mission to restore the true meaning of Memorial Day by honoring fallen Veterans. Today, CTL has grown to also include fallen service members and first responders.

CTL's signature event is the annual Memorial May National Relay. The National Relay consists of five walking and riding routes (West Coast, Mountain States, Midwest, New England and East Coast), resulting in a 20,000-mile trek across 48 states, stopping in 86 cities with brief ceremonies at 38 national cemeteries.

All routes converged on Memorial Day in Dallas for an event and rally. In 2022, over 214,000 volunteers participated in the National Relay including bicyclists, motorcyclists, CTL-branded buses and cars and even a horse or two.

## Patriot Day National Day of Service

The Memorial May National Relay partnership has been so successful that NCA expanded its collaboration with CTL with the Patriot Day National Day of Service. On or around September 11, NCA and CTL invite thousands of volunteers for a day of public service at participating national cemeteries. After a brief ceremony, they clean headstones, plant flowers, lay mulch and remember those men and women – police, firefighters, first responders and ultimately Veterans – who paid the ultimate sacrifice on that tragic day, and in the years following.

## Travis Manion Foundation "If Not Me, Then Who..."

With that simple, but powerful sentence comes the inspiration for TMF. 1st Lt. Travis Manion, USMC, made the ultimate sacrifice for



Volunteers prepare to march in the annual Carry The Load Memorial May National Relay.

the safety of his patrol on April 29, 2007. TMF carries on the legacy of selfless service and leadership embodied by Manion and all those who have served, or continue to serve, our nation.

## The Honor Project

In 2022, NCA participated in TMF's "The Honor Project." Volunteers, known as Spartans, visited five national cemeteries on Memorial Day. While there, they placed a commemorative, handcrafted Flag of Valor token at the gravesites of fallen heroes at the request of family or friends who were unable to visit their loved one. On Memorial Day 2023, TMF expanded with visits to 10 national cemeteries.

In addition to "The Honor Project," TMF empowers Veterans and families of fallen heroes to develop character in future generations and to unite their communities through the "Character Does Matter" youth mentorship program and the "Spartan Leadership Program," a 7-month program connecting purpose with passion to create a lasting legacy of service leaders. ♦

Photo courtesy of Carry The Load



Photo by Martin Wright



# NCA Helps Preserve Veteran Legacies in Historic Private Cemeteries

Richelle Taylor, Public Affairs Specialist



Samantha Dorm, a volunteer with the Friends of Lebanon Cemetery, got emotional watching a video about restoring damaged Veterans' headstones at Lebanon Cemetery in York, Pennsylvania. She had been integral in the restoration project.

"I had to get myself together before replying," wrote Dorm on email. "The video looks GREAT!!! I'm so proud to be able to represent my family and to help influence others to recognize and care for our Veterans."

In 1872, segregated burial practices forced a group of citizens to purchase approximately two acres of land to bury their loved ones with dignity and respect. The original two acres eventually grew to five acres.

Lebanon Cemetery reflects the diverse historical development of York. Formerly enslaved people have been laid to rest alongside freed men and women and Civil War soldiers. The cemetery is now one of the largest and oldest Black-owned cemeteries in York County. In November 2022, the Friends of Lebanon Cemetery held a dedication ceremony to unveil 12 newly installed headstones of Veterans who served in World Wars I and II.

During the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Day of Service in 2023, NCA staff worked with volunteers and stewards of historic Black cemeteries to share best practices on restoration and replacement of damaged Veteran headstones. VA Secretary Denis McDonough and Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Matt Quinn also attended, learning about the soldiers interred there.

"Dr. King would be really touched to see the citizens of York, of all different faiths and backgrounds coming together to take care of our Vets, and I feel great to be a part of this," said McDonough.

### **Eight More Private Cemeteries Restore Headstones**

NCA has identified a growing trend of concerned community leaders and researchers working to provide headstones and markers for Veterans with unmarked graves in private cemeteries. NCA began collaborating with local leaders both to provide headstones for Veteran graves and address any historical disparities about access to burial and memorial benefits. NCA is committed to ensuring equality in death that may have eluded Veterans



Samantha Dorm, volunteer at the Friends of Lebanon Cemetery, shares some of the cemetery's history with VA Secretary Denis McDonough.

Photo by Martin Wright.



in life. These stories and many more reflect the rich history of Veterans who were forgotten. Most of these servicemen were Black and were buried in segregated cemeteries. NCA is committed to supporting communities to help our nation understand the full history of those who served.

Barbara Barksdale, owner of Midland Cemetery outside of Steelton, Pennsylvania, shared her 30-plus year commitment to preserving the remains from the Revolutionary War onward. Midland Cemetery joined the National Register of Historic Places in 2023.

Students of Whitehouse, Ohio, high school teacher Paul LaRue have secured and installed more than 70 headstones in five cemeteries since 2002. More than half were for Black Civil War Veterans.

Diane Boettcher manages Historic Ellsworth Cemetery in Westminster, Maryland. Boettcher, community leaders and representatives from Sen. Christopher Van Hollen's office gathered in June 2022 to celebrate the unveiling of 11 new headstones for United States Colored Troops.

Preserving the legacy of Veterans by marking their gravesites is happening across the country. In 2022, Clarence Hawkes, Jr., and Veteran Jimmy James Barchanowicz worked to restore historic Greenview Cemetery in Nottoway County, Virginia. Established in 1901, the cemetery sits on land purchased by enslaved persons.

Kansas City resident James Finch is captured in a September 2022 Fox News story restoring headstones for Veterans buried at Elmwood Cemetery. After cleaning headstones, Finch revealed Veteran James McGee, who served in the War of 1812, and Augustus Malone of the 72nd Ohio Infantry Regiment, who served in the Union Army during the Civil War.

In Cañon City, Colorado, cemetery volunteer Luise Barton approached Fremont County Veteran Service Officer Marty Peek in 2021 to acquire headstones. Barton believes there are 1,800 Veterans buried in the cemetery, many of whom have unmarked graves or military headstones that are illegible.

A 2019 story reported how concerned Orlando resident Larisa

Roderick secured 61 headstones for Union Civil War, Spanish-American War and World Wars I and II Veterans buried at Mount Peace Cemetery in St. Cloud, Florida.

### **Congress Takes Action as NCA Develops a Toolkit**

In December 2022, Congress authorized funding to Black cemeteries across the nation for preservation and restoration. Grants and technical assistance for this project will be administered through the National Park Service. The first cemetery to benefit from this program is the historic Union Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, which received a \$400,000 grant.

NCA is developing a toolkit of best practices for local community leaders dedicated to this important task. The toolkit will be shared with private cemetery owners, volunteer organizations, state and local government officials, historical preservation societies, non-profit and faith-based organizations and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. NCA has internal partnerships with the VA Center for Development and Civic Engagement and Office of Diversity and Inclusion for subject matter expertise.

For more information on how to get involved, visit: [www.cem.va.gov/hmm/cemetery-restoration.asp](http://www.cem.va.gov/hmm/cemetery-restoration.asp). ♦



The restored headstone of WWI Veteran Harvey Gibson is unveiled at Ellsworth Cemetery in Maryland.

Laura Hatcher Photography



# NCA Chaplain Helps Families Heal

Jennifer Lynch, Public Affairs, NCA Pacific District

When you think of national cemeteries, you think of national shrines with beautiful landscapes and meticulously kept gravesites. Yet they also serve as centers of spiritual healing, especially with the addition of a new chaplain pilot program.

Rev. Caroline Flanders was hired at Riverside National Cemetery in November 2022 as part of a two-year program to explore how having an on-site chaplain can assist Veterans, families and team members with spiritual and grief support. She is part of the National VA Chaplain Service, which has 873 chaplains across the country at VA Medical Centers and is the first, and only, chaplain hired to support a VA national cemetery.

Flanders is successfully bridging the gap for Veterans and family members by coordinating clergy services and connecting them to grief support. She assists cemetery employees and the more than 400 volunteers at the cemetery who support cemetery functions. She also provides training on topics such as personal resilience, life balance and dealing with grief.

Another part of Flanders' position is engagement with area funeral homes. She is reaching out to funeral homes, not only to let them know about NCA memorial and burial benefits, but also to assist in finding clergy for committal services. In January 2023, she set up RNC's first compassionate care and grief support group.

"It usually takes a while to get a group together," said Flanders. "I've tried to set them up at other area community hospitals. This was the first time that I had an instant group formed at the initial meeting. We had three widows of Vietnam Veterans that had passed away related to Agent Orange exposure and a Gold Star Mother. They formed a bond because they went through similar experiences. It was great to see them open up and share their feelings."

While Flanders doesn't officiate committal services, she supports events and ceremonies, as well as weekly committal services for unclaimed remains. Recently, she attended a service for one of the members of the Riverside National Cemetery Support Committee.

The Veteran had died after a short battle with cancer. "EO" was deeply cherished and admired by many people in the community. He was a well-loved leader at his place of work, a local quarry.

Flanders attended his visitation at the mortuary and then a memorial service at the quarry with hundreds of people in attendance to pay their respects. Flanders says she was deeply moved by this man's devotion to his people and the pride he had as a Vietnam-era Veteran.

"I have supported committal services for families in last-minute emergencies and special circumstances, but my main role is to connect them with the clergy of their choice," she said.

Flanders is a Veteran of the United States Navy Hospital Corps, serving from 1983 to 1992. A graduate of Loma Linda University School of Religion, Flanders is ordained and endorsed by the Centers for Spiritual Living. She previously served the local community as a licensed funeral director. Most recently, Flanders served as a medical chaplain for Riverside Community Hospital and as the Director of Supportive Care Services for Advantage Health Systems.

"From a very early age, I have known there was a sacred vocation for me to answer," said Flanders. "It became very clear to me my education, training and experience had prepared me for the role of chaplain. I knew with conviction it was 'exactly' what I am supposed to do."

She is making a difference in the lives of Veterans, family members and team members at Riverside National Cemetery, making it truly a place for healing. ♦



Chaplain Caroline Flanders and Deputy Director Craig Arsell preside over an Unclaimed Veteran committal at Riverside National Cemetery in California.

# Reflections by a former Under Secretary

Randy Reeves

As the NCA celebrates its 50th anniversary, I am deeply honored I was able to serve with the greatest professionals in federal government. The team members of NCA serve America's Veterans and their families day-in and day-out with one single focus: to provide the best possible care and service, knowing there is only one opportunity to get it right. As I reflect on NCA's accomplishments, the following are a few things I was fortunate to be a part of during my time as NCA's sixth under secretary from 2017 to 2021.

## "No Veteran Ever Dies"

I've said many times we all die two deaths: The first is when breath leaves us for the last time; the second is when no one speaks our name or tells our story. We must do all we can to ensure our Veterans don't suffer that second death.

NCA's team members took that commitment to heart. In addition to our daily focus on keeping the memories of our heroes alive, we were able to launch the first and only public memorial platform, the Veterans Legacy Memorial, which allows for tributes and Veteran-related content to be uploaded for every Veteran interred at a VA national cemetery. The only one of its kind in the federal government, VLM provides a memorial for the more than four million Veterans interred in NCA cemeteries, many with uploaded biographies produced through the Veterans Legacy Program, an innovative partnership between VA and universities, colleges and local K-12 schools. The VLM platform was vitally important during the coronavirus pandemic as it gave families a way to grieve, honor loved ones and tell their stories during a time when large groups were unable to be together in person.

## Customer Service

In 2019 NCA increased its American Customer Satisfaction Index score to 97 points, an unprecedented achievement that sets a benchmark as the highest ever score for any public or private organization. NCA outperformed major corporations as well as all other federal agencies. I am pleased to see that NCA still maintains that very high standard today.

## COVID 19 Pandemic

The entire team ensured NCA was able to deliver record customer service throughout the pandemic; all national cemeteries continued operation while



Randy Reeves

Now former Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Randy Reeves walks the grounds at Alexandria National Cemetery in Virginia.

keeping team members, Veterans and families safe. NCA continued as one of the best places to work in federal government based on the All-Employee Survey and external rankings.

## Expanded Access

I feel very fortunate to have been able to work with the NCA team and oversee the largest expansion of national cemeteries since the Civil War, including the opening of eight new national cemeteries and transfer of 11 Department of the Army historic cemeteries, which increased the number of national cemeteries from 135 to 153. NCA also prioritized its close partnership with state and tribal governments through the Veterans Cemetery Grant Program by awarding more than \$140 million in grants to expand and improve burial options in 24 states, the Sioux Nation and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Burial access for Native American Veterans is essential, and I was honored to personally participate in several state and tribal cemetery openings and make several trips to tribal lands to meet with tribal leaders.

NCA truly sets the bar in serving our nation's Veterans and their families. Its customer service is of the highest quality. As NCA celebrates 50 years of excellence, it is the men and women of NCA (70% of them Veterans themselves) who make it the great organization it is. They will forever have my admiration and respect for the work they do. I am humbled and honored to have been able to be a part of the NCA team. ♦

## Directors and Under Secretaries Since 1993-2021

Jerry W. Bowen 1993-1998 | Robert "Mike" Walker 2000-2001

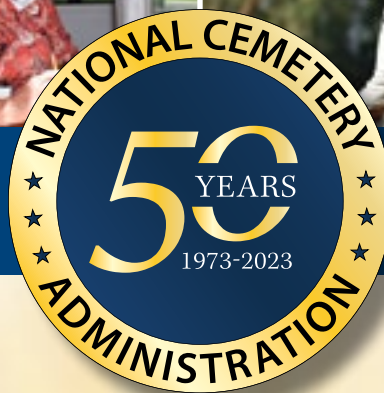
Robin L. Higgins 2001-2002 | John W. Nicholson 2003-2005

William F. Tuerk 2005-2009 | Steve L. Muro 2011-2014 | Randy Reeves 2017-2021





## NCA Customer Satisfaction Overall Survey Results



## "Leading the Nation in Customer Satisfaction"

### Respondent Reports\*

*Highlights*

NCA ranked first in customer satisfaction among the nation's top corporations and federal agencies in an independent survey conducted in 2022 by the CFI group using the science of the American Customer Satisfaction Index.

**NCA once again earned an exceptional customer satisfaction index score of 97.**

In 2019 NCA was the first organization to achieve a score of this level. It is the highest score every measured by the CFI Group for the American Customer Satisfaction Index. For comparison, the federal government average is 66. This is the seventh consecutive time NCA has been ranked first in customer satisfaction among the nation's top companies and federal agencies.



"The cemetery is well maintained and has always looked well cared for. The staff has always been helpful, courteous, respectful and thoughtful."

"Given the size of the cemetery, my expectations were not that high. Instead, I was pleasantly surprised by the entire operation. The grounds are beautiful. Everything was handled above and beyond."

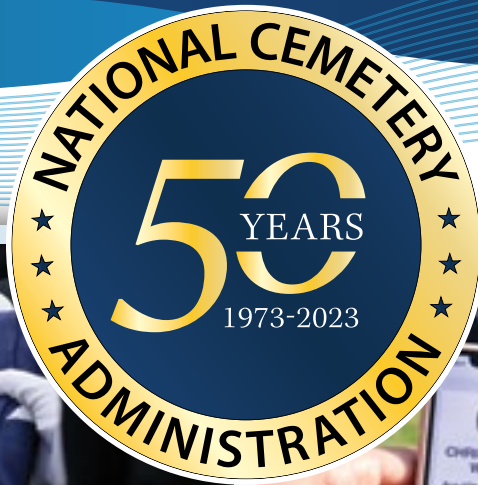
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To achieve the remarkable score of 99 for the Cemetery Services, which includes maintenance of the national cemetery and respectfulness of the service and interment, 9 out of 10 survey respondents gave the highest possible rating of 10.

\*CFI Group, Department of Veterans Affairs NCA 2022 American Customer Satisfaction Index, August 2022



# BENEFITS BEYOND OUR NATIONAL CEMETERIES



## Burial Flags

Every family receives a flag to honor their Veteran's service



## Veterans Legacy Memorial

A memorial website for every Veteran in a VA, VA-funded, or DoD cemetery



## Headstones, Markers and Medallions

Shipped anywhere in the world to mark a Veteran's grave in a private cemetery



## Presidential Memorial Certificates

An engraved certificate signed by the president honoring a Veteran's service

