DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CEMETERIES AND MEMORIALS

October 31, 2017 – November 1, 2017
St. Louis, Missouri
8:30am – 4:30pm

MINUTES

Committee Members Present:

John (Jack) A. Kelly, Committee Chairman
Leslie (Les) E. Beavers, Committee Member
Gordon W. Lightfoot, Committee Member
Edith Gilbert Smith, Committee Member
Michael S. Figlioli, Committee Member
JoAnn Fisher, EdD, Committee Member
Marianne A. Trussell, Committee Member

Committee Members Absent:

Michael W. Horne, Committee Member
Bonnie Carroll, Committee Member
Heather Mitchell-Braatz, Committee Member

Ex-officio Members Present:

Charles Sellars – National Park Service

Office of the VA Secretary Attendee:

Jelessa M.H. Burney, Program Specialist, Advisory Committee Management Office

National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Attendees:

Ronald E. Walters, PhD, Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
Tom Howard, Chief of Staff
Anita Hanson, Deputy Under Secretary of Management
Eric Powell, PhD, Director, Memorial Products Service
George Eisenbach, Director, Veterans Cemetery Grants Program
Bryce Carpenter, PhD, Educational Outreach Programs Officer
Christine B. Hamilton, Designated Federal Officer

Public Attendees:

None to report
**NCA Site Visit Facilitators:**

Jill Angelo, Deputy Director for Training, NCA National Training Center  
William Haggerty, Cemetery Director Intern Program Manager, NCA National Training Center  
Brooke S. Culler, Program Support Assistant, NCA National Training Center  
Jeff Barnes, Director, Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery  
Darrell Ryan, Assistant Director, Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery  
Rob Carrasquillo, Division Chief, National Cemetery Scheduling Office  
Dan Catron Division Chief, National Cemetery Scheduling Office

**Wednesday, October 31, 2017**

The semi-annual meeting of the VA Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials was held at the NCA National Training Center, which is located at Jefferson Barracks Medical Center, 1 Jefferson Barracks Drive, Building 56 in St. Louis, MO. The Committee convened at 8:00 a.m. for a meet and greet.

**Opening Remarks**  
Committee Chairman John A. (Jack) Kelly called the meeting to order at 8:35 a.m. Attendees recited the Pledge of Allegiance and held a moment of silence for Veterans and Active Duty Servicemembers. Chairman Kelly welcomed Committee members, VA employees, and the Ex-Officio representative for the National Park Service. He also provided an overview of the purpose of the meeting and introduced Mr. Ronald E. Walters, Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs.

**Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, Mr. Ronald E. Walters**  
Mr. Walters opened his discussion by thanking the Committee members for choosing to serve on this important Advisory Committee. He also thanked Chairman Kelly for his leadership and vision; and Christine Hamilton, Designated Federal Officer, for coordinating the meeting. His key points were as follows:

- NCA’s 2016 to 2021 Long-Range Plan is strategically aligned to VA Secretary Shulkin’s modernization priorities to improve service for Veterans and their families. Modernization efforts for NCA include: pre-need eligibility, same day Presidential Memorial Certificates, digital memorialization efforts, and Information Technology (IT) modifications.

- In September, Mr. Randy Reeves, the Executive Director of the Mississippi State Veterans Affairs Board and also President of the National Association of State Department of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA), was nominated as the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs. NCA is currently preparing for his arrival. Mr. Walters stated: “I look forward to working with him on how to improve the delivery of services to Veterans and their families, and I know this Committee will work very closely with him, as well.”
Presentation on NCA Modernization Efforts

Mr. Tom Howard, NCA Chief of Staff, provided an update on NCA Modernization efforts. He discussed the VA Secretary's, Dr. David Shulkin's vision for modernization and how NCA is implementing key initiatives. His key points were as follows:

- Secretary Shulkin's top five priorities are: (1) Greater Choice; (2) Modernizing Systems; (3) Focusing Resources; (4) Improving Timeliness, and (5) Preventing Suicide. The Secretary is also focusing on accountability of VA employees and delayering VA’s organizational structure. Mr. Howard discussed how NCA’s Long Range Strategic Plan ties into four of the five priorities. He also provided a general concept of the Accountability Bill to deal with Human Resource matters, and NCA’s plan for delayering.

- To address the concern that VA's governing structure is impeding efficiency and the service to Veterans, NCA has restructured the Cemetery Operations and Field Programs office. Two executive director positions were created to help consolidate and align key responsibilities over those two veteran-facing programs. NCA has also created a new Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovation, which realigns many public-facing efforts, such as the Veterans Legacy Program, digital memorialization, strategic communications, outreach, and community partnerships.

- NCA has made some improvements in assigning decision-making down from the Central Office level to the District level; and has created a Position Management Board (PMB) to introduce more discipline relating to the creation of new positions; or implementing substantive changes for existing positions.

- In terms of Greater Choice and Timeliness, Pre-Need determinations and the ability for family members to obtain a Presidential Memorial Certificates on the same day of interment are two initiatives that are underway now.

- NCA’s goal is to increase burial access to Veterans and eligible family members. Currently, NCA serves 91.7% of the total Veteran population within 75 miles of their homes. The goal is to serve 95% by 2021. NCA is currently in the midst of the largest expansion of the system since the Civil War. A number of construction, design, and land acquisition efforts are underway. For example, the Urban initiative provides a columbarium-only burial option to veterans and their families in urban areas. In just two weeks, NCA will be break ground in a location co-located with the Westerly Medical Center in Los Angeles, CA. In 2014 under the Rural initiative, NCA opened the first cemetery in Yellowstone, Montana. Committee Member Gordon Lightfoot asked about the cemetery structure of rural cemeteries. Mr. Howard clarified that rural cemeteries are smaller in footprint but provides a reasonable level of service, as required.
Based upon congressional interest and feedback from the annual Customer Satisfaction survey, NCA has implemented a Weekend Burial Program (cremation-only) at select national cemeteries. NCA Leadership will gauge the impact of weekend burials on budgetary and staffing resources. Cemeteries will continue to accommodate weekend burial requests, as we always have, for individuals who were killed in action or those who request such burials as part of their religious beliefs. Committee Member Edith Smith, requested the link to Federal Register publishing, which requested public comments on weekend burials. Mr. Howard stated that the link will be provided to the Committee by the DFO, Christine Hamilton.

There are three main areas of modernizing NCA’s technology: (1) replacement of old IT systems with Memorial Benefits Management System (MBMS); (2) implementation of GPS technology to ensure that our day-to-day efforts can be verified, documented and digitized; (3) and the Digital Memorialization effort to improve the educational experience for visitors, both at the cemetery and online.

Lastly, Mr. Howard discussed presidential charge to eliminate the duplication of efforts. NCA is currently in collaboration with the Department of the Army to potentially acquire eleven of their closed host cemeteries, which will allow NCA the ability to maintain and operate them as national cemeteries. NCA signed a Letter of Intent with the Army National Military Cemeteries on September 22, 2017. Chairman Kelly asked Mr. Howard to explore any concerns relating to military installations that have Prisoner of War (POW) cemeteries. In addition, Committee Member Leslie Beavers stated that the transfer of federal land can be a laborious process. Ms. Anita Hanson stated that two staff members, an environmental specialist and a cultural resource specialist, are looking at environmental and tribal issues of the land and will provide a report to the Under Secretary. Mr. Howard mentioned that the Committee will be updated on continuing efforts.

Earlier this year, Jessica Tozer, co-NCA sponsor on the Digital Memorialization Sub-committee, worked with VA’s Center for Innovation and Harvard University graduate students to rebuild the national gravesite locator for mobile use. The rebuild makes it easy to find a grave, cemetery, and other links to resources and information. Mr. Howard discussed other public-facing tools such as the Daily Burial Schedule, which displays daily interment updates online and the Facebook picture galleries of national cemeteries on the VA Internet site at https://www.cem.va.gov/.

NCA collaborated with the Defense Information School to produce clips about the Baltimore National Cemetery and the Loudon Park National Cemetery and the Veterans interred in those cemeteries. The clips are on Facebook, YouTube, and the VA Blog. Mr. Howard showed the Committee one of the clips. Committee Member, Ms. JoAnn Fisher, stated that since women Veterans do not self-identify themselves as Veterans, VA should ensure that women Veterans are
portrayed in films, literature, and presentations; and to ensure that women Veterans receive the benefits and honors that they deserve. Ms. Anita Hanson mentioned that she is working with the VA Center for Women Veterans on a number of outreach issues and a webcast to get the information out. Mr. Walters stated that Ms. Fisher’s point is extremely well taken and that the Veterans Legacy Program has spotlighted numerous women in lesson plans, as well as in the video vignettes. The Veterans Legacy Program is not only a way of memorializing those who have served, but it is also a way of showing future generations about military service and the honor of being in the military; both men and women, regardless of their backgrounds or other types of characteristics. Future generations can look at these vignettes and lesson plans and be inspired by them.

**Presentation on Pre-Need Determinations & Same-Day Presidential Memorial Certificates**

- Mr. Eric Powell, Director of Memorial Products Service, discussed two initiatives, same-day Presidential Memorial Certificates (PMC) and Pre-Need Burial Eligibility Determinations, which are tied to the modernization priority to improve timeliness.

- The same-day PMC initiative was launched on October 2, 2017, at Calverton National Cemetery. Since implementation, NCA provided over 230 PMCs to families of Veterans who were being interred at Calverton National Cemetery. Mr. Powell stated that the plan in January 2018 is to expand to the other four busiest cemeteries: Fort Snelling, Riverside, Cleary, and Jefferson Barracks.

- Committee Member Michael Figlioli asked about the printing mechanisms and if there has been any consideration of adding PMC request on the Pre-Need form. Mr. Powell stated that he would take this point up for consideration.

- Pre-Need is going to serve a number of purposes. It not only simplifies facilitating family's end-of-life planning, but it will also be a means to archive veteran’s documents in advance of their time of need. It will also help us with workload projections. To date, NCA provided over 35,000 approval letters for burial eligibility.

**Presentation on State and Tribal Veterans Cemeteries**

- Mr. George Eisenbach, Director of Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP), provided an overview of the program, the grants process, and the strategic outlook for FY17 and FY18.

- VCGP was established in 1978 and assists states, territories, and tribal governments to establish, expand, and improve Veteran cemeteries.
provides 100% of development costs and has awarded more than $743 million
awarded since 1980.

- In FY2017, there were 108 state cemeteries in 47 states, Guam & Saipan; 4 new
cemeteries under construction; and more than 38,200 interments. In FY2018,
the President’s Budget to run this program is $45 Million.(same as FY7).

- The four types of grant projects are (1) New Establishment; (2) Expansion; (3)
Improvement; and (4) Operations and Maintenance (O&M – raise and
realignment of landscaping and headstones, etc.).

- Four new cemeteries are under construction: Fort Stanton State Veterans
Cemetery; Tennessee State Veterans Cemetery; Kentucky Veterans Cemetery -
Southeast; and Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery.

- Recently opened cemeteries Leech Lake Veterans Cemetery in Cass Lake,
Minnesota (tribal); All Nations Veteran Cemetery (tribal) and Gallup State
Veterans Cemetery, which NCA held the groundbreaking on October 25, 2017, in
New Mexico.

- The strategic goal is to provide burial options to veterans and their eligible family
members that are not served by one of 135 national cemeteries. Access to 95% of Veteran
population by 2021.

- The Compliance Review Program ensures that cemeteries are routinely
inspected and maintained in accordance to NCA operational standards and
measures.

**Presentation on Information Technology & Construction**

- Ms. Anita Hanson provided an update on Information Technology (IT) efforts and
Construction projects.

- **IT Modernization Efforts:**
  
  - The replacement of old Burial Operations Support System (BOSS) with
    **Memorial Benefits Management System (MBMS)**, which will provide a
    stable, strong platform to enable NCA to meet its mission and goals and
to be integrated with other systems across VA

  - **Daily Burial Schedule**, which allows family members and loved ones to
retrieve time and location information for those being interred at a VA
national cemetery

  - **Memorial Enterprise Letters (MEL)**, will improve the process for issuing
Resolution Letters and then will expand to better position NCA to have a
single, modern, customer-engagement application that can manage, process, and generate letters of various types across the entire future MBMS

- The Memorial Benefits Management System (MBMS) will provide a **Workflow Management System** for cemetery process, including Electronic Interment Notice/Dig Slip (INDS) and automated tracking of remains from arrival to interment. Cemetery and Field Crew will update data in real-time using hand-held devices, similar to mini iPads.

- Through the Presidential Memorial Certificate (PMC) Program, NCA provides next of kin and loved ones with an engraved paper certificate signed by the current President to honor the memory of honorably discharged, deceased Veterans. The **WebPMC** system manages PMC requests initial receipt through printing, adds enhanced report capability for user productivity, error identification, and order tracking; ingests data from systems, which also generate PMCs. WebPMC was deployed on September 27, 2017. NCA continues efforts to refine and improve WebPMC to deliver a user-approved system.

  - **Construction projects:**

    - For FY 2018, NCA plans to obligate over $100 million in support of 55 minor construction projects at its national cemeteries—this year represents one of the largest amounts NCA has received in support of its national cemeteries

    - Minor projects include gravesite expansions, infrastructure repair, renovation of historic lodges, construction of columbaria and committal shelters

    - All 5 Districts are scheduled to have minor projects undertaken at cemeteries within their jurisdictions

    - Projects are collaboratively prioritized by both Field and Central Office staff

    - The VA’s Office of Construction and Facilities Management (CFM) manages the Department’s major projects, and NCA is CFM’s customer

    - In FY 2018, VA’s Office of Construction and Facilities Management received an estimated $256 million to support NCA major projects

    - Projects this fiscal year include:
      - National Cemetery of the Alleghenies ($39M)
      - Sacramento Valley ($35M)
      - Abe Lincoln ($35M)
Public Comments
Chairman Kelly asked if anyone, other than Committee members, wanted to make a public comment. No comments were made either in writing, in person, or on the phone.

Meeting Adjourned

The meeting was adjourned at 11:40am for lunch. For the remainder of the day, the members conducted site visits at the NCA National Training Center; National Cemetery Scheduling Office; and Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery. The meeting was reconvened the next day on Thursday, November 1, 2017.

Thursday, November 1, 2017

Opening Remarks

Chairman Kelly reconvened the meeting on November 1, 2017, at 8:30am. He thanked everyone for their patience and participation in the site visits at the National Training Center, National Cemetery Scheduling Office, and the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery. He also asked Mr. Eric Powell for clarification regarding the revalidation process for pre-need eligibility determinations.

Mr. Powell reiterated that the once the application is received, NCA verifies the information based upon the Veteran’s service. If the Veteran is eligible, NCA will send the Veteran or family an approval letter. The eligibility information is also entered into the Eligibility Office automation system. At the time of need (when the Veteran or eligible family member passes), NCA will re-validate that nothing has changed in terms of capitol offense or sexual offense tier 3, which would bar them from eligibility.

The Chairman urged that NCA takes another look at the revalidation pre-need process to ensure customers do not have to resubmit DD 214s or other paperwork at the time of need. Mr. Powell stated that he would take a look at the process.
Committee Member Leslie Beavers suggested a call-back system for the 1-800 number, which would allow for an automated call-back queue if customers require additional time to gather documents to schedule a burial. Mr. Powell stated that he would take a look at this, as well.

**Presentation on Veterans Legacy Program & Digital Memorialization**

- Dr. Bryce Carpenter provided the members with an update on the Veterans Legacy Program & Digital Memorialization efforts.

- The Veterans Legacy Program is a strategic effort which will modernize the way VA memorializes Veterans through academic partnerships at the local level, digitization of the cemetery experience and the creation of online memorialization & exhibit spaces for Veterans’ artifacts.

- Dr. Carpenter stated, “*Our 135 national cemeteries are in America’s communities. So we try to encourage the universities to get their students engaged with learning local history through the diversity of the veteran’s experience. And that has been a line that has become really central to our messaging.*”

- In the first full contract year, NCA partnered with Universities below and engaged professors, teachers, and students of all levels in researching and sharing stories of service of Veterans in their local national cemetery.
  - University of Central Florida (Orlando, FL) – research school
  - Black Hills State University (Spearfish, SD) – rural school
  - San Francisco State University (San Francisco, CA) – urban school

- Each program is different, but each leads to college students sharing their Veteran research with school students on site at the NCA cemetery.

- Dr. Carpenter showed the members a video of an educational outreach effort between the University of Central Florida and Davenport Middle School on May 19, 2017.

- Legacy is leading the effort to modernize the cemetery experience for visitors, students, researchers, and the public.
  - **Phase I, September 2017:** *Beta of NCA Guide*, an app that will create a digital cemetery space that geo-locates Veteran research to virtual gravesite (web-based and Virtual Reality).
  - **Phase II, November 2017:** *New Nationwide Gravesite Locator*, presenting an intuitive interface for locating Veterans’ graves and generating navigable maps.
Phase III, Spring 2018: Online memorialization platform, first of its kind. Allows family and friends to pay respects and share photos in an online memorial space. For historic Veterans, a place for genealogists, scholars, and students to share research.

There was some discussion on the whether or not controversial or derogatory content or all historically accurate information will be included in the Veteran’s digital biography; and if the family will have any rights on what is being included.

Committee Member Marianne Trussell also expressed concern about the privacy of Veterans and Committee Member Edith Smith stated that there may be complications regarding ownership of the Veteran’s record if there are more than one spouse and children.

Mr. Walters and Dr. Carpenter clarified that the contracts with the universities can be framed to include/exclude information in order to receive the narrative on the Veterans experience. Mr. Walters stated that students can be provided clearly defined parameters for the narratives and that the narratives will be screened to ensure that they are consistent with the decorum of the cemetery, are positive in nature, and not offensive to the family.

The online memorialization platform is the other very large and significant component that is producing lesson plans about the veteran’s service and periods of conflict. Lesson plans are available for grade-level, K-12 teachers at https://www.cem.va.gov/cem/legacy/lessons.asp.

Dr. Carpenter demonstrated the interactive map and app, which shows which gravesites have biographical information.

Sub-Committee Presentations:
The meeting was recessed at 10:22 a.m. and reconvened at 10:35am. Presentations from sub-committees on Digital Memorialization; Medal of Honor Medallion design; and Outreach Ambassador program proceeded. Committee Member, Michael Figlioli presented for the Digital Memorialization Sub-Committee; Committee Member, Gordon Lightfoot presented for the Outreach Ambassador Sub-Committee; and Chairman, Jack Kelly presented for the Medal of Honor Medallion Sub-Committee. During the afternoon session, the Committee deliberated and decided on the following recommendations and endorsements:
Proposed Recommendations and Endorsements

The following recommendations are subject to further review and revision prior to formal submission to the VA Secretary for final approval:

**Recommendation 1:** On December 16, 2016, Public Law 114-115, Sec 301, (Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2016), expanded eligibility for a medallion to Medal of Honor (MOH) recipients. Earlier this year, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) consulted with the US Army Institute of Heraldry. The US Army Institute of Heraldry presented two design options for the MOH medallion that can be affixed to headstones in private cemeteries. The Chair previously appointed a sub-committee group to assist with this project. The US Army Institute of Heraldry presented two design options for the Medal of Honor (MOH) medallion to NCA staff and the sub-committee. The sub-committee reached out to several Congressional Medal of Honor recipients for their review and feedback on the design options. The Committee recommends that NCA continues to work with the US Army Institute of Heraldry to develop a suitable Medal of Honor medallion product and an awareness campaign to notify recipients and survivors about the product by early Spring 2018. The Committee recommends action items:

1. NCA staff and Medal of Honor (MOH) sub-committee shall work with the Institute of Heraldry to address concerns raised by certain MOH recipients regarding the recommended medallion design and to report back to the Committee no later than December 1, 2017.

2. NCA shall develop an awareness campaign for this MOH medallion.

**Recommendation 2:** NCA has partnered with select universities and IT developers to construct and deploy an electronic system that respectfully and honorably tells the unique, individual stories of those interred in our national cemeteries. Through the use of focused research, mapping and recognition software and strategic partnerships with stakeholders the Digital Memorialization Project continues to develop an online platform unique to VA/NCA. The Committee recommends that NCA staff continues to collaborate with the Digital Memorialization sub-committee on project deliverables and objectives. The Committee recommends the following action items:

1. NCA clearly defines the content boundaries of individual Veteran narratives and other materials prepared as part of the Veterans Legacy Program to ensure a solely positive commemorative experience. NCA will develop written guidelines regarding the type of “positive” information and other materials to be included, and the role of the Next of Kin (NOK) in the process within 30 days.

2. Continue to collaborate with contractors, historians, professors, and students who enthusiastically embrace the specialized, unique mission of the NCA.
3. Engage with traditional and non-traditional stakeholders in promoting the Veterans Legacy Program/Digital Memorialization Project to encourage the greatest amount of participation among eligible veterans, survivors, and family members.

4. Maintain a public facing digital presence that promotes in a clear and simple manner the goal of the project and how veterans, survivors, their family members, and friends can participate.

5. Establish and/or publish benchmarks to track deliverables and report developmental progress to NCA leaders and Advisory Committee members at least quarterly.

6. Ensure that the final product serves as a gateway to all VA benefits by links, videos, or any other methods to include considering Vets.gov, in addition to publicly accessible VA websites.

Recommendation 3: The Committee recommends that NCA establish an NCA Outreach Ambassador Program which provides a model by which Committee members have increased access to outreach opportunities and receive suitable staff support (training; materials etc.). The Committee recommends the following action items:

1. A time phased Outreach Ambassador (OA) program be instituted to educate Committee members. This education program may be conducted in collaboration with NCA Outreach Officers and representatives from the Outreach Ambassador Sub-committee.

2. OAs (private volunteers) will reach out to local National Cemeteries and their communities to offer assistance to advance NCA outreach.

3. Where appropriate, all NCA outreach materials shall include reference to “survivors”.

4. The OA Sub-committee shall report annually to the Committee on the program’s progress.

5. Based upon the 2016 recommendations, the Committee would like for NCA to continue efforts on the following items:

   - Develop materials or programming to raise awareness of burial benefits and how to properly communicate to family members who have no military experience.
   - Partner with professional sports franchises and teams to transmit the NCA message to a wider audience.
Produce a new version of “A Sacred Trust,” (AST) to demonstrate greater diversity and/or develop various versions of AST.

Introduce legislation to require funeral directors nationwide to disclose burial entitlements for Veterans and their families. Work with Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) to standardize fact sheets.

**Recommendation 4:** The Committee recommends that NCA also consider the following items:

1. The Committee recommends that NCA enter into discussions with the Department of Justice to establish an interagency agreement to establish a system to resolve inquiries on eligibility, as it relates to P.L. (Capitol Crime and Tier 3 Sex Offenses).

2. The Committee recommends that NCA investigate allocating a portion of funds in the Veteran Cemetery Grant Program, Operations & Maintenance (O&M), for expenses related to the training of state and Tribal cemetery employees by NCA employees.

3. The Committee commends service of Ronald E. Walters during his period as Interim and Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs and extends their deep appreciation for his advancement of transparency and inclusion and the execution of his duties. Mr. Walters has executed his duties at the highest standards with the tradition of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

**Selection of Next meeting location and dates**

The next Advisory Committee on Cemeteries and Memorials meeting will be held in May 2018 in Washington, DC.

**Closing Remarks, Interim Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs/Committee Chair/DFO**

Chairman Kelly offered closing remarks thanking the Advisory Committee members for their participation and Acting Under Secretary, Mr. Ronald Walters for his leadership and support. He also thanked the members, who are no longer on the Committee, for their time and service.

**Meeting Adjourned**

[Signature]

John A. (Jack) Kelly  
Committee Chair

*Note: The verbatim transcription of this meeting is available upon request.*