Domestic & Foreign Cemeteries for U.S. Veterans

Four federal agencies are now responsible for national cemeteries and other Veterans’ burial grounds – but all these began with the U.S. Army. In the United States and its territories, Veterans and eligible family members receive burial benefits at national cemeteries; in addition, nearly 124,000 Veterans of World War I and II are buried in American cemeteries on foreign soil. The four federal agencies share a mission to honor military service with perpetual care of Veteran graves.

U.S. Department of the Army, Office of Army Cemeteries (OAC)
Since 1862 the U.S. Army has cumulatively overseen ninety-eight national cemeteries and hundreds of temporary American military cemeteries on foreign soil, but following periodic transfers to other agencies it now manages just two – Arlington and the Soldiers’ & Airmen’s’ Home national cemeteries, both in Greater Washington, D.C. In the 1930s, it deaccessioned significant Civil War cemeteries associated with historic events to the National Park Service. After both world wars, its Graves Registration Service consolidated temporary military cemeteries into twenty-two permanent overseas military cemeteries and transferred them to the American Battle Monuments Commission. After it opened a final few post-World War II properties, the Army maintained a non-expansion cemetery policy. In March 1968, a report initiated by President Lyndon B. Johnson to evaluate all Veteran programs was submitted to Congress. Among other items, it recommended that eighty-two national cemeteries be transferred to the then-Veterans Administration; in 1973 that occurred. In 2019-2020, the Army transferred another eleven historic properties – ten post cemeteries and a World War II prisoner-of-war cemetery – to the Department of Veteran’s Affairs, National Cemetery Administration (NCA).
Additionally, the Army oversees cemeteries at military installations and its academy at West Point, NY.\(^1\)

**Department of the Interior, National Park Service (NPS)**

During the 1930s, the system of U.S. military cemeteries was realigned for the first time. Reorganization of executive branch functions included the consolidation of War Department historic sites – National Military Parks, battlefields and monuments. If Civil War national cemeteries were co-located with these properties, they were transferred from the Army to the Department of the Interior, National Park Service, in 1933. The goal was preservation, protection, and interpretation. Eleven are on or near sites of major battles such as at Antietam, MD, and Gettysburg, PA. NPS acquired three more Army national cemeteries between 1939 and 1942. Andersonville National Cemetery, GA, was transferred from the Army in 1971; it is the only one of fourteen NPS national cemeteries that continues to offer burial space to eligible Veterans.

**American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC)**

Relatively few American military personnel died abroad before the twentieth century and most were buried near their place of death or at sea. Soldiers killed in Mexico during the Mexican War (1846-1848) are one example. In response to the volume of World War I deaths, on March 4, 1923, Congress created the American Battle Monuments Commission to oversee military cemeteries and monuments honoring American Expeditionary Forces who died abroad. The Army operated these cemeteries until February 26, 1934, when Executive Order 6614 transferred eight World War I cemeteries in Europe to ABMC. The Mexico City military cemetery was transferred to ABMC in 1947. Two years later, fourteen World War II military cemeteries in Europe, Africa, and the Philippines were transferred from the Army to ABMC. In 2013, it took responsibility for Clark Veterans Cemetery at Pampanga, Philippines. Today ABMC administers twenty-six permanent American burial grounds and thirty-one federal monuments on foreign soil. Domestically it is responsible for three memorial

\(^1\) The U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force manage cemeteries at their military installations and service academies.
monuments, including one at NCA’s National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. ABMC cemeteries are preserved as historic landscapes with interpretive facilities and are closed to new burials.

Department of Veterans Affairs, National Cemetery Administration (NCA)
The National Cemetery Administration is the newest federal agency responsible for U.S. national cemeteries and soldiers’ lots. The National Cemeteries Act of 1973 (PL 93-43, June 18, 1973) established an office at VA that would become NCA and provided for the transfer of eighty-two national cemeteries – plus thirty-three soldiers’, government, and Confederate lots – from the Army to VA. The law also reassigned procurement and supply of government headstones/markers to VA. Another ten Army post cemeteries (and a prisoner-of-war cemetery) were transferred to NCA in 2019-2020; three were renamed national cemeteries and will continue to provide burial space. NCA manages more than 150 national cemeteries, more than two dozen post cemeteries/government lots, and nine Confederate cemeteries/monuments. To ensure that burial benefits will always be available to Veterans everywhere, NCA is responsible for developing new national cemeteries, expanding existing properties, and providing grant funds to states/tribes to develop non-federal Veteran cemeteries.

Department of Defense, Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA)
The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency maintains no cemeteries, but in recent years its mission to identify unknown World War II burials in Veteran cemeteries, such as the USS Oklahoma sailors at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, has established an important connection with NCA, ABMC, and the Army. DPAA is responsible for recovering and identifying the remains U.S. military personnel listed as prisoners of war or missing in action from past conflicts across the globe. The agency was formed in January 2015 by the merger of offices with a similar mission. DPAA has laboratories at Offutt Air Force Base, NE, and Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, HI.

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