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Testimony

of

RICHARD JONES

**AMVETS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR**

presented to the

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

regarding:

***The Independent Budget Assessment of the Department of  
Veterans Affairs Report on the National Cemetery System***



**A M V E T S**

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Cannon House Office Building

MR. CHAIRMAN, RANKING MEMBER EVANS, AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

On behalf of the member organizations of *The Independent Budget*, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, I am pleased to present an assessment of the Department of Veterans Affairs report on the national cemetery system. My name is Richard Jones, the National Legislative Director of AMVETS.

As you know, this coming year will be the 17<sup>th</sup> year *The Independent Budget* Veterans Service Organizations have cooperatively worked to produce a document that sets out policy positions and budget recommendations on veterans' programs administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs. A continuing part in the overall development and publication of *The Independent Budget* has been on the development of recommendations to improve the national cemetery system, veterans' burial benefits, and overall management of the National Cemetery Administration.

*The Independent Budget* veterans service organizations (*IBVSOs*) strongly backed congressional approval of the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act, which became Public Law 106-117 in November 1999. Section 613 of this Act mandates VA to conduct a comprehensive study on current veterans' burial benefits and future burial needs of veterans and their families, including options to better serve veterans and the projections of estimated costs of a national system.

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs issued the results of the required report entitled *Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries* in three separate volumes:

- Volume 1: Future Burial Needs
- Volume 2: National Shrine Commitment – Facility Condition Assessment
- Volume 3: Cemetery Standards of Appearance

In the viewpoint of the *IBVSOs*, the *Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries* adequately responds to the mandate of Congress. The Study addresses what we believe to be the National Cemetery Administration's two major challenges: First, to provide for the passing of the generation of men and women that defended freedom and democracy in World War II; and Second, to ensure the maintenance of current cemeteries and the continued planning, design, and construction of world-class, quality cemeteries to honor veterans and their families into the future.

*Volume 1: Future Burial Needs* reports that 31 additional veterans cemeteries will be required over the next 20 years in order to provide 90 percent of veterans with a burial option in a veterans cemetery. According to the report, current and planned cemeteries under the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) fiscal year 2000 strategic plan, which runs through 2006, will service most large population centers. However, to reach the 90 percent level, the report states that an additional 18 cemeteries would need to be added.

Currently the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) maintains more than 2.5 million gravesites in over 13,850 acres of cemetery land while providing interments to more than 85,000 individuals annually. NCA responsibilities include 120 cemeteries, 61 open for full service, 26 allow only cremations, and 33 are closed to new interments. A new cemetery in Oklahoma, Ft. Sill National Cemetery, is currently under construction and operating a fast-track section that permits interments to begin prior to completion of all construction activities. In addition, continued progress is anticipated on cemetery development in Atlanta, Florida, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Sacramento.

Clearly, the rapid aging of the current veteran population has placed great demands on NCA operations and currently available burial space. Primarily because of the passing of the World War II veterans and eligible family members, the VA interment rate is projected to increase significantly over the next several years, peaking at nearly 108,000 in fiscal year 2008. As veteran deaths accelerate, the demand for veterans' burial benefits will increase.

*Volume 1: Future Burial Needs* concludes with three important recommendations to achieve a burial option for 90 percent of veterans residing within a 75-mile service area of an open national or state cemetery.

1. Continue to encourage state grant program cemeteries as a means of providing service to veterans.
2. Continue to examine ways to expand the useful life of existing cemeteries to avoid closure and loss of service.
3. Build new national cemeteries at or near the locations of high veteran populations if neither of the previous options are possible.

The *IBVSOs* strongly support these options, and we encourage the Committee's active review of the future burial needs of veterans and their families to ensure a continued effort to meet the growing demand for space. Clearly, without the strong commitment of Congress and its authorizing and appropriations

committees, VA would likely fall short of burial space for millions of veterans and their eligible dependents.

*Volume 2: National Shrine Commitment* provides a system-wide comprehensive review of the conditions at 119 national cemeteries. (An assessment of the new Ft Sill National Cemetery in Oklahoma was not conducted because the cemetery, although open for burial, has not yet been fully constructed.)

The study in *Volume 2* identifies over 900 projects for gravesite renovation, repair, upgrade, and maintenance. According to the study, these project recommendations were made on the basis of the existing condition of each cemetery, after taking into account the cemetery's age, its burial activity, burial options and maintenance programs. The total estimated cost of completing these projects is nearly \$280 million, according to the study.

A major part of the contributing factor in these project repair recommendations is the accumulation of uncorrected past deficiencies. Clearly, as any public facilities manager knows, failure to correct identified deficiencies in a timely fashion will surely result in continued deterioration of facilities and increasing costs related to necessary repair. The *IBVSOs* agree with this assessment and believe that Congress needs to carefully consider this report to address the condition of NCA cemeteries and ensure they remain respectful settings for deceased veterans and visitors. We recommend that Congress and VA work together to establish a timeline for funding these projects based on the severity of the problems.

*Volume 3: Cemetery Standards of Appearance* is an careful presentation of the scope of work required to elevate existing national cemeteries as national shrines. *Volume 3* serves as a planning tool to review and refine overall operations in order to express the appreciation and respect of a grateful Nation for the service and sacrifice of military veterans. In developing its response, VA closely examined some of the elements that comprise the finest military cemeteries in the world, including military cemeteries under the jurisdiction of the American Battle Monuments Commission and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission of the United Kingdom. It also examined our nation's most prominent military cemetery, Arlington National Cemetery, to help form a set of national standards to improve the appearance of NCA cemeteries and guide the application of future resources.

The report describes one of the most important elements of veterans cemeteries, namely to honor the memory of America's brave men and women who served in the Armed Forces. "The commitment of the nation," the report finds, "as expressed by law, is to create and maintain national shrines, transcending the

provisions of benefits to the individual.” An important part of the purpose of veterans cemeteries is to serve beyond the dignified burial of the veterans and “to serve a national purpose after the burials have ceased, even long after the visits of families and loved ones.”

The *IBVSOs* agree with this assessment. The purpose of these cemeteries as national shrines is one of NCA’s top priorities. Many of the individual cemeteries within the system are steeped in history and the monuments, markers, grounds and related memorial tributes represent the very foundation of these United States. With this understanding, the grounds, including monuments and individual sites of interment, represent a national treasure that deserves to be protected and nurtured.

Indeed, Congress formally recognized veterans cemeteries as national shrines in 1973 stating, “All national and other veterans cemeteries...shall be considered national shrines as a tribute to our gallant dead.” (P.L. 93-43:24 1003(c))

Unfortunately, despite NCA continued high standards of service and despite a true need to protect and nurture this national treasure, the system has and continues to be seriously challenged. The current and future needs of NCA require continued adequate funding to ensure that NCA remains a world-class, quality operation to honor veterans and recognize their contribution and service to the Nation.

When *The Independent Budget* for fiscal year 2004 is published later this year, we will recommend a budget consistent with NCA’s growing demands and in concert with the respect due every man and woman who wears the uniform of the United States of America.

In this vein, we call on the Administration and Congress to provide the resources required to meet the critical nature of the NCA mission and fulfill the Nation’s commitment to all veterans who have served their country honorably and faithfully.

One more point that deserves comment is individual burial benefits used by veterans in church, community, and other private sector cemeteries to include state cemeteries. The final study submitted by the Secretary appears to overlook the assessment VA contracted PricewaterhouseCoopers to complete in December 2000 on the adequacy and effectiveness of current burial benefits.

The PricewaterhouseCoopers report finds that many of the burial benefits provided veterans have seriously eroded due to inflation. The *IBVSOs* are deeply concerned that the Federal government has not

increased veterans' burial benefits for the families of wounded or disabled veterans to keep up with inflation. While these benefits were never intended to cover the full cost of burial, they now pay for only a fraction of what they covered when the Federal government first started paying burial benefits for our veterans in 1973. Future congressional consideration of burial benefits should mark carefully the erosion of individual benefits and take effective actions to restore these burial benefits to a level sufficient to honor our nation's service men and women.

*The Independent Budget for fiscal year 2003* recommended Congress consider several legislative updates based on the PricewaterhouseCoopers report, as follows:

- support veterans who desire burial in state facilities by increasing the plot allowance to \$670 from the current level of \$300. The plot allowance now covers only 6 percent of funeral costs. Increasing the burial benefit to \$670 would make the amount proportionally equal to the benefit paid in 1973.
- increase the service-connected burial benefits from \$2,000 to \$3,700. Prior to action in the first session of the 107th Congress, which increased the amount \$500, the benefit had been untouched since 1988. The request would restore the allowance to its original proportion of burial expense.
- increase the nonservice-connected benefit from \$300 to \$1,135, bringing it back up to its original 22 percent coverage of funeral costs. This benefit was last adjusted in 1978, and today covers just 6 percent of burial expenses.
- index these burial benefits for inflation to avoid their future erosion.

*The Study on Improvements to Veterans Cemeteries* presents valuable information and tools for the development of a truly national veterans cemetery system. We recommend Congress give it close examination, because the suggestions it contains require congressional and administrative budgetary support.

Mr. Chairman, we applaud the Committee for holding this hearing and thank the Committee for extending the opportunity to present remarks on this important subject. We look forward to working with the Committee to strengthen, enhance, and improve the earned benefits of our nations' veterans and their families. This concludes my statement, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.