

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 22, 2024

The Honorable Christine E. Wormuth
Secretary
U.S. Army
101 Army Pentagon
Washington, DC 20310-0101

Dear Secretary Wormuth:

We write to express our ongoing concern regarding the Army's indefinite suspension of the Caisson Platoon at Arlington National Cemetery (ANC). Because the Army suspended the program in 2023, over two thousand veterans could not be buried at ANC with the full military honors they have earned, and many families have chosen to wait for the Army to reinstate the Caisson Platoon before burying their loved ones, prolonging their grief. The distinguished tradition of the caisson program is integral to ensuring our nation's servicemembers and veterans are laid to rest in a manner befitting of their service and sacrifice. Yet, despite our repeated requests, your department has failed to properly update us on its efforts to reinstate the Caisson Platoon, and the Army refuses to provide us with an estimate for when the platoon will be fully operational.

Following the deaths of military horses due to consumption of gravel and sand, and because the platoon's remaining horses' health was rapidly declining due to living in unsanitary conditions and not being properly cared for, on May 1, 2023, the Army announced a one-month suspension of caisson operations within ANC. Later, the Army announced to the public that the suspension would be extended to June 2024.

This May, you testified before Congress that the issues leading to the deaths of military horses and subsequent suspension of the Caisson Platoon were "surprisingly complex and challenging."¹ Given the complexity and urgency of this matter, we are astounded that the Army waited until December 2023 to seek comprehensive expert advice from the outside equestrian community regarding how the Army should ensure proper living conditions and care for the military horses – after already spending taxpayer money on interim measures to renovate the platoon's stables and provide training to the platoon's soldiers. These interim measures included contracting with a trainer whose inappropriate methods led to further injuries to the remaining military horses. As you know, one solution that the Army approved was to purchase only one

¹ United States Senate Committee on Appropriations. "A Review of the President's Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request for the Army." May 21, 2024.

color of horse. This absurd suggestion delayed the Army's ability to purchase enough horses for the platoon, and it was only after finally seeking true equestrian expertise did the Army learn that any color of horse can effectively perform the military duties of the Caisson Platoon, as has been the case since its establishment. We are alarmed that the Army spent significant taxpayer funds on ill-conceived efforts before seeking expert advice, and that the Army's haphazard and ineffective approach to solving the actual problems that led to the demise and declining health of the Caisson Platoon military horses, has delayed the resumption of the platoon's operations.

On April 12, 2024, the Army notified Congress it had extended its suspension of Caisson Platoon operations indefinitely until certain conditions are met. Following over a month of delays, in a May 15th staff-level briefing, the Army finally provided Congress with more information on the situation and stated that it could not provide an estimated date for when the platoon would be fully operational. At that briefing, our committee staffs requested that the Army provide, within one month, a list of the short, medium, and long-term requirements it must meet before fully resuming Caisson Platoon operations. Our staff also requested follow up briefings within one month. Two months have passed, and despite our repeating these requests, the Army has failed to comply.

As you know, our Committees of Jurisdiction have the responsibility of overseeing the Army's operations at Arlington National Cemetery to ensure that veterans and their families receive the dignified burial they have earned. The Army's failure to timely respond to our requests for information has a direct impact on our oversight function. We demand full transparency and accountability so that we can ensure that the Caisson Platoon's vital services are restored promptly and with the highest level of care for our military horses. Our nation's fallen servicemembers and veterans, and their families, deserve a proper final farewell without further delays.

Therefore, we request that you provide the following no later than **August 1, 2024**:

1. A detailed plan, including short, medium, and long-term requirements that the Army must satisfy, to sustainably resume Caisson Platoon operations.
2. A detailed and comprehensive update on the current status of that plan, including the progress of the Army's efforts to rehabilitate its military horses.
3. Quarterly briefings for staff of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs on the status of the Caisson Platoon program until the platoon is fully operational.
4. What contracts and projects were funded and completed to improve the conditions of the Caisson Platoon's horses prior to the Army's December 2023 summit with outside equestrian experts. What was the cost to taxpayers for funding these projects and contracts?

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5. Please also provide any results, advice, or recommendations provided to the Army from reviews conducted by outside experts.
6. An estimated date of when the Caisson Platoon will resume operations at ANC.

Should you have any questions regarding this request, please contact our committee staff.

Sincerely,



MIKE BOST
Chairman
House Committee on Veterans'
Affairs



JERRY MORAN
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Veterans'
Affairs

cc:

The Honorable Mark Takano, Ranking Member, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

The Honorable Jon Tester, Chairman, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs