

WRITTEN STATEMENT
BEFORE
THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE
ON
MILITARY CONSTRUCTION, VETERANS AFFAIRS,
AND RELATED AGENCIES
BY
ROBERT J. DALESSANDRO
ACTING SECRETARY
AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION

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Chairwoman Wasserman Schultz, Ranking Member Carter, members of the Subcommittee...

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you, to share with you the mission and operations of the American Battle Monuments Commission, and to report on developments over the past year.

We are using our FY21 appropriation for several monument restoration projects and cemetery improvements: fabricating replacement cabochons for the memorial chapel at the Honolulu Memorial; waterproofing and repaving the terrace of the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Cemetery; cleaning and restoring the Montfaucon Memorial; replacing gold leaf and infected alignment trees at Florence American Cemetery; rehabilitating the service area at Lorraine American Cemetery; constructing a new service area at Brittany American Cemetery; and resurfacing the exterior spaces at the Brest Naval Monument.

This past year has been unlike any the Commission has experienced since the Second World War, as we responded to a pandemic crisis the likes of which we had not seen since the Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918. The impact of the Covid-19 virus is well documented, and it continues to affect the world's health and economies.

ABMC, like most Federal agencies, went into a maximum telework status in mid-March 2020 and our cemeteries and memorials were closed to visitation. Work crews were not allowed on the grounds, leaving it to our superintendents, most of whom live within the cemeteries, to perform basic grounds maintenance tasks. They performed exceptionally well during a period of high stress and uncertainty, maintaining the sites in caretaker status until work crews were again able to report for duty on a limited basis in early summer.

All of our visitor centers and three cemeteries remain closed today, and our Arlington headquarters and Paris overseas operations office remain on maximum telework. Throughout the crisis, we have stayed in close contact with U.S. Embassy country teams and adhere to the guidance and restrictions imposed by host governments. The health and safety of our staff and visitors remain our highest priority.

Travel restrictions have prevented a full assessment of the estimated recovery costs to restore our sites to their pre-Covid condition. That assessment will begin as soon as possible. While a visitor may not notice a decline in a cemetery's condition, we do. In addition to recovery costs, with the roller coaster cycle of openings and closings we

have experienced overseas, we have spent about \$650,000 preparing our facilities for safe occupancy.

These costs have included—

- Enhanced janitorial services and cleaning routines.
- Disinfectant spray, wipes and dispensers.
- Hand sanitizer, gloves and face masks.
- Protection shields and tactile covers for exhibits.
- Hardware and software for check-in kiosk systems.
- Other equipment such as fans, ventilators, misting machines.

These examples do not include contract renewals or new contracts where costs are expected to be higher due to new Covid-19 protocols. And because ABMC operates in many countries, each with differing regulations and protocols, the cost of simply operating cemeteries has increased. For example, the Commission estimates that janitorial services expenses will increase 54 percent.

While we regret having to close our commemorative sites to visitors, ABMC staffs worldwide rarely missed a beat in sustaining our systems and processes. Not since World War II had ABMC cemeteries been closed to visitors on Memorial Day, but our public affairs and overseas operations teams adjusted, sharing the stories of service and sacrifice through live-stream coverage of virtual Memorial Day ceremonies and social media postings that kept these historic sites and heroes in the public's consciousness – a truly exemplary fulfillment of the promise of our first Chairman, General of the Armies John J. Pershing, that “time will not dim the glory of their deeds.”

Covid-19 has influenced our day-to-day tempo greatly, but it has not prevented the agency from making significant strides forward.

In December, the former Mardasson Memorial in Bastogne, Belgium, became ABMC's 31st federal monument when it was transferred to us on a 99-year lease between the Kingdom of Belgium and ABMC, with a nominal lease payment of 1 Euro per year that was paid at the beginning of the lease term. ABMC thus assumed stewardship for long-term care and management of what is now known as the Battle of the Bulge Memorial.

This is the sole memorial commemorating the American forces who fought during the Battle of the Bulge, the largest and bloodiest engagement the United States fought in Europe during World War II; it is a significant addition to ABMC's commemorative mission. Over the next several years, we will fully restore the memorial, with enhanced

accessibility and landscaping and the addition of a small visitor center to tell the story of this historic battle.

And just last month, with the dedication of a restored Pershing Park in Washington, D.C., as the National World War I Memorial, ABMC entered a partnership with the World War I Centennial Commission and the National Park Service to jointly maintain and operate America's newest national memorial and now ABMC's 32nd worldwide.

Over the past several years, we have invested \$3.5M to clean and restore several World War I monuments in Europe, whose conditions no longer met our quality standards: the Audenarde Monument in Belgium and six monuments in France, at Bellicourt, Brest, Cantigny, Lafayette Escadrille, Montfaucon, Montsec and Tours.

A new visitor center is in design at our Netherlands cemetery and exhibits rooms will be included in a new Pedestrian Access Facility at the North Africa cemetery. Both should be completed by the end of 2022 and opened to the public in early 2023. And I am pleased to report that we reached agreement with the National Cemetery Administration on a potential site for an interpretive center at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific – the Punchbowl – in Honolulu. Design work is underway and that we hope to complete by 2024.

We continue to pursue public education outreach initiatives through our partnerships with the Smithsonian American Art Museum here in the nation's capital and the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, along with a developing program with History Unbound which targets outreach to new audiences. Despite the limitations of Covid, our historians have participated in online webinars, sharing the cultural and historical heritage represented by our overseas cemeteries and memorials. They are national treasures, and these partnerships allow us to share those treasures with new constituencies.

Our ability to fully execute our responsibilities in the telework environment we have faced since March 2020 has been dependent in large measure on the effectiveness of our IT systems and processes. In the technological environment, the past two years have been pivotal for us, as we overhauled the agency's IT infrastructure to remove technology bottlenecks and transitioned our systems and processes to a secure environment in the Cloud. This \$5.0M transformation initiative is nearing completion and has put ABMC on a path towards continuous technological improvement.

In 23 months ABMC will enter its Centennial year. The American Battle Monuments Commission has never been a large agency, in terms of staff or funding, but it has

always been respected for its commitment to those we honor. From General Pershing's construction of significant landmark monuments like Chateau-Thierry, Montfaucon and Montsec following the Great War, to the establishment of World War I and World War II cemeteries designed by world class architects and artisans, to more recent stewardship of historical landmarks like the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Cemetery and the former Mardasson Memorial, ABMC has long sought opportunities to commemorate the achievements and sacrifice of America's armed forces.

While our ability to share the stories of those achievements with visitors has improved dramatically with the adoption of professional interpretive techniques and the opening of modern visitor centers, the past year has shown how quickly we can lose contact with the audiences we have traditionally served through on-site visitation. But we now carry the world with us on our phones and that is where we must engage new stakeholder constituencies. We have watched as other agencies launch innovative digital media products to reach audiences beyond those that will visit their sites. We are in the process of doing the same.

We stand on the shoulders of so many dedicated men and women who built and sustained a proud legacy of public service. It is incumbent on us now, as we continue to ensure that our sites remain magnificent symbols of freedom, to use every means possible to ensure equally that those sites remain relevant and treasured by generations to come. That is our challenge as we approach our second century.

We sincerely hope the world opens up again to convenient and safe travel, so you and other members of the Subcommittee once again have the opportunity to visit our overseas sites to see how we are investing the resources you entrust to us.

Thank you.