

RECORD VERSION

STATEMENT BY

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BEFORE THE

**ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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**ON DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY'S VIEWS ON
THE VIETNAM HELICOPTER CREW MEMORIAL ACT**

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Heck, Ranking Member Davis, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the Department of the Army's view on the Vietnam Helicopter Crew Memorial Act.

Arlington National Cemetery is our Nation's unique and iconic resting place devoted to those individuals who made a significant sacrifice and commitment to the defense of our country in the armed services. Arlington National Cemetery is recognized as a national treasure and is an active military cemetery, interring over 7,000 individuals annually. Since 1864, these hallowed grounds have been the final resting place for more than 400,000 active duty service members, veterans and their families. It is our duty, and the United States Army's commitment, to ensure that Arlington National Cemetery remains an active cemetery as long as space accommodations allow to honor and serve our Nation's military heroes. On behalf of the cemetery and the Department of the Army, I express our appreciation for the support that Congress has provided over the years.

HISTORY OF COMMEMORATIVE MONUMENTS IN THE CEMETERY

Prior to 2012, commemorative monuments and plaques were approved in accordance with Title 31, Code of Federal Regulations Part 553 and required a joint or concurrent resolution by Congress. Public Law 112-154 established a more deliberative process and included specific parameters, due process, and decision authority for commemorative monument approval, including Congressional review and overriding disapproval authority. Additionally, this law directs Arlington National Cemetery to preserve space not conducive to ground burial of human remains for the memorization of individual service members whose remains are missing, never recovered, scattered or buried at sea. Over the past 25 years only four monuments have been approved and installed in Arlington National Cemetery. The two most recent in 2002 and 2011 – the

Battle of the Bulge and the Jewish Chaplain's Memorial, respectively, were authorized through congressional legislation.

VIETNAM HELICOPTER CREW MEMORIAL ACT

The proposed Vietnam Helicopter Crew Memorial Act legislation, as drafted, would direct the Secretary of the Army to place in Arlington National Cemetery a memorial honoring the helicopter pilots and crew members of the Vietnam era, and for other purposes.

This legislation does not address the broader concern of preserving the life of the cemetery well into the future. By virtue of longstanding Army policy and rulemaking, commemorative monuments may only be placed in Arlington National Cemetery after a collaborative and deliberate process. Monuments reduce land that would otherwise be used for burial memorialization of our killed in action, deceased active duty service members, veterans, and their eligible family members.

The initial request from the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association was processed in accordance with the 2012 National Defense Authorization Act and Public Law. The appropriate congressional oversight committees were notified of the Secretary of the Army's decision to disapprove the request for a commemorative monument. In its stead, he approved the placement of a plaque at the base of a living tree. While other veteran organizations have had their requests for tree plaques disapproved in order to preserve space in the cemetery, the Secretary chose to allow a tree plaque to honor the members of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association.

Given the present rate of burials and the dwindling inventory of available gravesites and niches, Arlington National Cemetery will close for first interments or inurnments in the 2030s. The reality is that space is finite. Each year, ground burial is denied to veterans who service does not rise to the level to justify displacement of an eligible veteran.

Additionally, under current eligibility any future casualties our Nation sustains after the 2030's may not find space available at Arlington National Cemetery for those who pay the ultimate sacrifice – our Killed in Action service-members.

Arlington National Cemetery is devoted to ensuring the most important memorials are placed on its hallowed grounds. Those are the individual government headstones marking the resting place of veterans who have served and sacrificed their life in service to our Nation. We are responsible for ensuring commemoration in perpetuity, as established by law. Maintaining individual memorialization of those who have earned a place at Arlington National Cemetery is the most important responsibility we as a Nation hold at Arlington National Cemetery. This was the key consideration for the cemetery staff and the Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery when they reviewed and made their recommendation to the Secretary of the Army. His thoughtful and detailed review found the same and resulted in his decision.

CONCLUSION

The Army understands the general intent of the legislation to honor these veterans and their service. However, as stewards of our most hallowed military burial grounds, Arlington National Cemetery must diligently preserve land which is ultimately designated for the sole purpose of providing the final resting places for our heroes who are killed in action, active duty service members, veterans, and their eligible family members. Any structure – be it commemorative or utilitarian in nature - that diverts from the expressed mission should be placed in other locations suitable for their representation.

Chairman Heck and Ranking Member Davis, this concludes my testimony. I will gladly respond to any questions that you or the subcommittee members may have.