

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

July 21, 2020

The Honorable Mark Takano  
Chairman  
House Committee on Veterans Affairs  
B234 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Phil Roe, M.D.  
Ranking Member  
House Committee on Veterans Affairs  
3460 O'Neill House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe:

I am writing in support of H.R. 6039, my legislation transferring the Mare Island Naval Cemetery to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

I applaud the Committee for considering this vital legislation at its legislative hearing on July 23, 2020, and am grateful to you and your staff for their diligence on this matter.

As we have discussed before, the Mare Island cemetery is the oldest military cemetery on the West Coast, and is home to the graves of nearly 900 U.S. Navy and Marine Corps veterans, including three recipients of the Medal of Honor.

Unfortunately, when the Mare Island Naval Shipyard was shuttered in 1996, this sacred site was transferred to the nearby City of Vallejo, which – given the economic consequences of military base closures – was plainly unable to afford to care for the cemetery. As a result, the graves of hundreds of veterans have disintegrated, and the site has languished in unacceptable disrepair for much of the past two decades.

At my urging, the Department of Defense graciously agreed two years ago to conduct initial repairs on the cemetery, including repairing fencing and drainage systems, removing invasive trees, and installing a flagpole. While these repairs are significant (and should reduce the cost to the government of maintaining the cemetery), they are not enough. Those interred at Mare Island deserve the dignity of a well-maintained, solemn memorial, which is why H.R. 6039 is so vital.

I understand the Department of Veterans Affairs is concerned that this bill might set a precedent, under which additional military cemeteries around the nation might be subsequently transferred to the Department. I appreciate the tremendous work the Department – including the National Cemeteries Administration – does on behalf of our nation's veterans, and fully recognize our obligation to be responsible stewards of federal spending.

However, as a combat-wounded veteran myself, I would reiterate to the Department and the Committee that the precedent ought to be that every veteran receives a dignified, appropriately maintained burial ground. If thousands of veterans' graves are disintegrating across our country, the Department ought to care for them, and Congress ought to provide the needed resources. With respect to Mare Island, the bad precedent was set in 1996, when the federal government transferred the graves of hundreds of fallen heroes to a City that quite obviously could not afford to care for them. This cemetery should never have been transferred in the first place.

I urge the Committee to expeditiously advance H.R. 6039, and am deeply grateful to you for your efforts.

Sincerely,



MIKE THOMPSON  
Member of Congress