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TESTIMONY OF

**DIANE M. ZUMATTO
AMVETS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR**

BEFORE THE

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS, SUBCOMMITTEE
ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE & MEMORIAL AFFAIRS**

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

***ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION***

CONCERNING

**TIMELESS HONOR: REVIEWING CURRENT OPERATIONS OF OUR NATIONAL
CEMETERIES**

334 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

TUESDAY, 9 DECEMBER 2014

Introduction: Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus, and distinguished committee members, I am pleased, as always, to sit before you in support of our National Cemeteries. Though most of us go about our daily lives never thinking about the events surrounding our departure from this world, there is a lesser known branch of the Department of Veteran's Affairs, the National Cemetery Administration or NCA, whose responsibilities are to provide and maintain the final resting place for all honorably discharged American Veterans.

Our national cemeteries not only help foster patriotism and preserve our nation's history; their appearance also demonstrates the nation's appreciation for the selfless service and the sacrifices made by all American Veterans. In order for NCA to accomplish their mission of honoring "Veterans and their families with final resting places in national shrines and with lasting tributes that commemorate their service and sacrifice to our Nation," every national cemetery is required to adhere to rigorous standards necessary to not only attain, but retain, national shrine status.

Establishing a national cemetery as a national shrine suggests that the grounds, the gravesites and the surroundings are both beautiful and an awe-inspiring tribute to those who gave so much to preserve the American way of life. Each cemetery provides an enduring memorial to their sacrifice as well as a dignified and respectful setting for their final rest. Therefore, it is with this sacred duty in mind that we expect the stewardship, accessibility and maintenance of our entire NCA cemetery system be treated as the highest priority. AMVETS believes that the dignified burial of America's veterans is equally as important as any other service provided by the VA.

AMVETS Cemetery Oversight Visits: As the 'go-to' veteran service organization on National Cemetery issues, AMVETS has taken on the responsibility of conducting independent oversight visits of our National Cemeteries. Additionally, AMVETS is responsible for writing the NCA portion of the Independent Budget and testifies on cemetery issues throughout the year. In order to better meet these responsibilities, it became clear that a concerted effort to visit several National Cemeteries during the course of 2014 was in order. With the full support of AMVETS I was able to visit 7 National Cemeteries, in 4 different MSNs (Memorial Service Networks). While at Jefferson Barracks, I had the opportunity to view the operations of both NCA's Scheduling Office and National Training Center. I also had the rare privilege of visiting an Israeli Military Cemetery during a trip to Israel in October.

National Cemeteries Visited in 2014

MSN II - Memphis, TN; Shiloh, TN; and Corinth, MS (see photos # 1, # 2 & # 3, respectively)

MSN III - Dallas-Ft. Worth TX & Ft. Bliss, TX (see photos # 4 & # 5/#6, respectively)

MSN IV - Jefferson Barracks, MO (see photo # 7)

MSN V - Tahoma, WA (see photo # 8 & # 9)

Mount Herzl National Cemetery, Jerusalem, Israel (see photo # 10 & #11)

The goals of these visits are to ensure that our National Cemeteries are appropriately serving the needs of our veterans, meeting the requirements of the National Shrine Initiative and to expand the knowledge base for AMVETS staff involved in these issues. Each U.S. cemetery visit consisted of observation of all cemetery operations including:

- committal services and shelters;
- columbaria walls and memorials;
- interments - both casketed and cremated;
- raise and realign projects;
- scheduling and training operations; and
- meeting with all cemetery personnel (Grounds Keepers, office, Directors, Apprentices, etc.)

At each cemetery visited, the high level of care and respect afforded to each and every veteran (and their families), was impressive. The majority of NCA personnel are veterans themselves and they repeatedly expressed the deep sense of honor they felt in being a part of this last phase in a veteran's life. At every cemetery, whether on foot or in a vehicle, if an employee spotted anything amiss or anyone needing assistance – trash of any kind, out of place flags, folks needing directions, etc. – they immediately stopped to fix the situation and/or assist.

Perhaps the most impressive observation involves the extreme care in maintaining the 'chain of custody' of a veterans (or eligible family members) remains – from the moment they arrive at the cemetery entrance, where they are met by a Cemetery Representative who confirms the identity of the decedent, until they are carefully laid to rest – cemetery employees repeatedly verify the identification of the decedent and the location of their final resting place. Each step of the interment process is carefully recorded using drawings, maps, and landmarks and must be verified by multiple individuals before getting a final review and sign off at the end of each days work.

While each cemetery was unique, it was also in character with its surroundings, was imbued with a deep sense of tranquility and was an important part of the nearby communities. At every site, stories were told of the many dedicated visitors - some family members, others not - and their commitment to the individual cemeteries.

I'm pleased that I had my first opportunity to experience one of the 3 water-wise cemeteries in the NCA system in El Paso, Texas. Growing up in the North Eastern part of the country, I had some strong, personal reservations going into my visit to the Ft. Bliss National Cemetery. In fact, I visited a local VFW post the day before my visit, so that I could hear from some local veterans regarding the Ft. Bliss Cemetery. Interestingly, their biggest complaint wasn't the appearance of the cemetery, but the fact that they felt they had not had the opportunity to give any input into the process. To put it into their words, "by the time we heard about it, it was already a done deal; it was nothing more than an announcement of the decision to change to a water-wise cemetery."

Upon my arrival at the Ft. Bliss Cemetery I was briefed by the Director and other staff who seemed to be somewhat on the defensive, so I was braced for the worst. What I saw was quite literally beyond my expectations – the cemetery was not only serene, but it fit beautifully and seamlessly into the surrounding landscape. I honestly believe that grass, even if it could be maintained, would look 'garish' and completely inappropriate in that setting. This is not to say that there might not be other options available, as a matter of fact, Mount Herzl National Cemetery in Israel uses stone, rather than grass, as its main ground cover.

In summarizing my cemetery site visits, overall I was highly impressed with the extreme attention to detail, moved by the genuine care and concern, and satisfied that our veterans and their families were being treated to the highest quality of customer service. It is my hope too that with the ongoing support of AMVETS and the NCA, I will be able to continue visiting several National Cemeteries each year in order to serve as a better resource to both my *Independent Budget* partners and to this committee.

As far as NCA in general, they:

- have continued to move forward with plans for new National Cemeteries to increase veteran access to burial options (18 more expected by the end of this decade);
- are exploring new burial practice options to better meet the changing needs of our veterans;
- continue to award valuable grants to states, territories and tribal organizations, via the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program, for the establishment, expansion or improvement of state veteran cemeteries;
- are working on the implementation of a new reimbursement benefit (as authorized in PL 112-260) for a casket or urn for veterans being interred in a national cemetery who have no next of kin;
- are increasing flexibility in the headstone/marker application process (see proposed rule 2900-A095);

- are continually seeking ways to improve gravesite accountability; and
- doing their part to hire veterans, including homeless veterans, to fill NCA vacancies

Before I close, I need to bring the reiterate the fact that AMVETS strongly believes that the most important obligation of the NCA is honoring the memory of the men and women who have selflessly served in our Armed Forces, we expect the stewardship, accessibility and maintenance of our entire NCA cemetery system, as well as Arlington National Cemetery, be treated as the highest priority. AMVETS believes that the dignified burial of America's veterans is equally as important as any other service provided by the VA. It is with this in mind that, we fully support extending advanced appropriations to the remainder of the discretionary and mandatory programs, services and benefits accounts of the VA, which would include the NCA.

Finally, I want to thank each member of this subcommittee for their tireless support of all American Veterans, but I would like to say a special word of recognition to Chairman Runyan whose leadership on this subcommittee has been second to none, so – Thank You, thank you, thank you for all of your hard work and AMVETS (and I) wish you well as you move forward.

National Cemetery Photo Gallery 2014 – All Photos taken by D. Zumatto

Photo # 1 - Memphis National Cemetery



Photo # 2 - Shiloh National Cemetery



Photo # 3 - Corinth National Cemetery

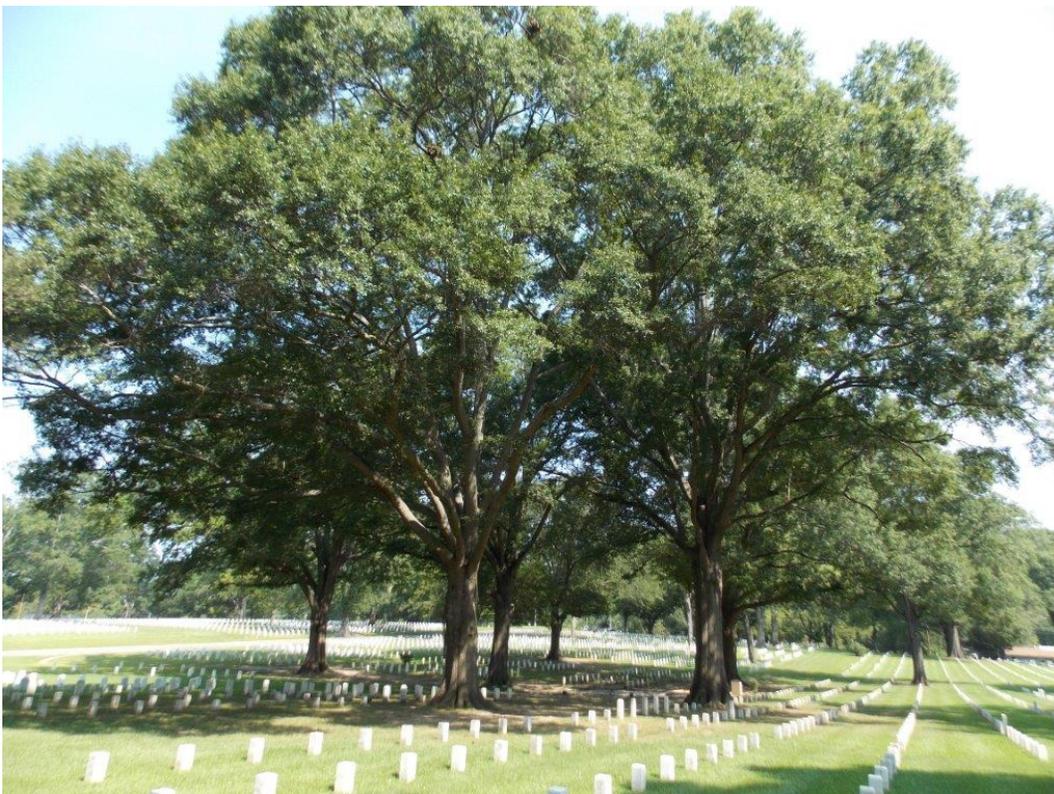


Photo # 4 – Dallas-Ft. Worth National Cemetery



Photo # 5 – Ft. Bliss National Cemetery



Photo # 6 – Ft. Bliss National Cemetery



Photo # 7 – Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery

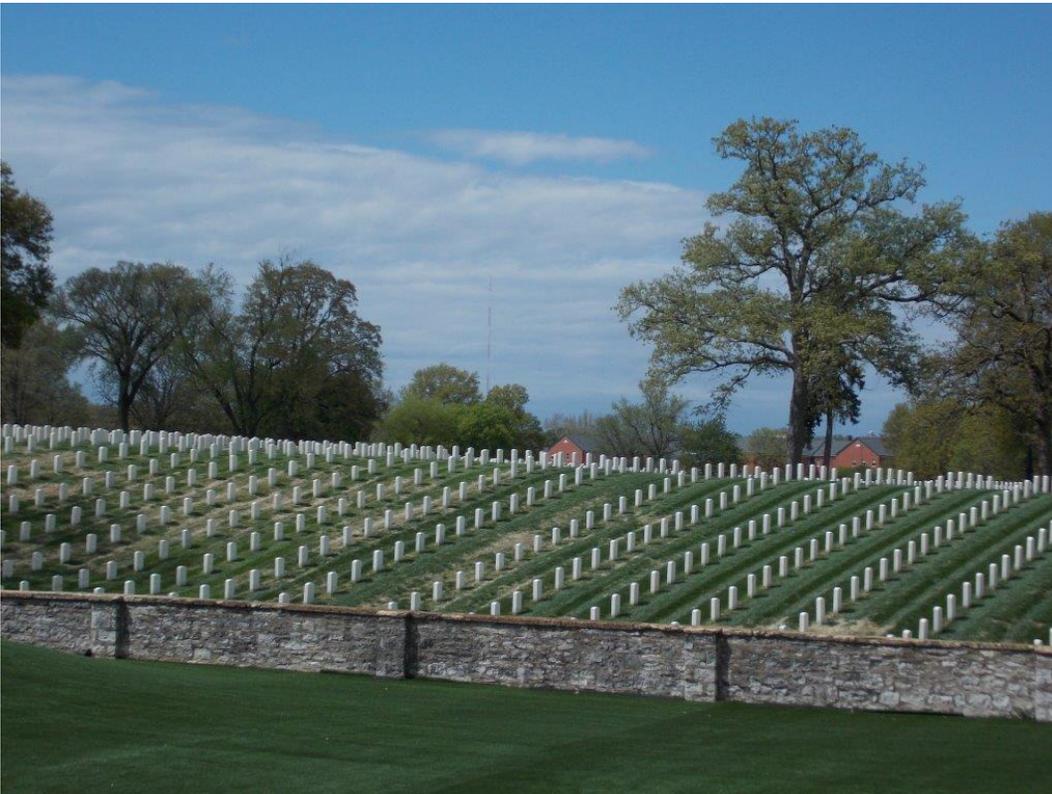


Photo # 8 – Tahoma National Cemetery



Photo # 9 – Tahoma National Cemetery



Photo # 10 - Mount Herzl National Cemetery, Israel



Photo # 11 - Mount Herzl National Cemetery, Israel



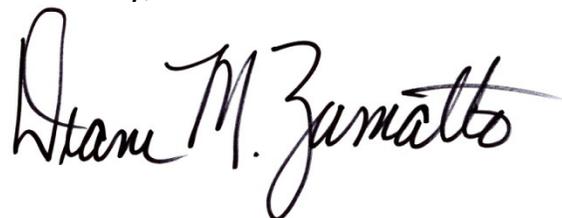
1 December 2014

The Honorable Jon Runyan, Chairman
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance
& Memorial Affairs
337 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Runyan:

Neither AMVETS nor I have received any federal grants or contracts, during this year or in the last two years, from any agency or program of the federal government.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diane M. Zumatto". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "D" and a long, sweeping underline.

Diane M. Zumatto
AMVETS National Legislative Director

Biographical Sketch

Diane M. Zumatto of Spotsylvania, VA joined AMVETS as their National Legislative Director in August 2011. Ms. Zumatto, a native New Yorker and the daughter of immigrant parents decided to follow in her family's footsteps by joining the military. Ms. Zumatto is a former Women's Army Corps (WAC) member who was stationed in Germany. Zumatto was married to a CW4 aviator in the Washington Army National Guard and is the mother of four adult children. Ms. Zumatto is extremely proud that two of her children have chosen to follow her footsteps into military service.

Ms. Zumatto has more than 20 years of experience working with a variety of non-profits in increasingly more challenging positions, including: the American Museum of Natural History; the National Federation of Independent Business; the Tacoma-Pierce County Board of Realtors; the Washington State Association of Fire Chiefs; Saint Martin's College; the James Monroe Museum; the Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield and the Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States. Diane's non-profit experience is extremely well-rounded as she has variously served in both staff and volunteer positions including as a board member and consultant.

After receiving her B.A. in Historic Preservation from the University of Mary Washington in 2005, Diane decided to diversify her experience by spending some time in the 'for-profit' community. Realizing that her creativity, energy and passion were not being effectively challenged, she left the world of corporate America and returned to non-profit organization.

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