

RECORD VERSION

STATEMENT BY

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BEFORE THE

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AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
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**ON OUR NATION'S HALLOWED GROUNDS; REVIEW OF AMERICA'S NATIONAL
CEMETARY FUNERAL OPERATIONS FOR VETERANS AND SERVICEMEMBERS**

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**NOT FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL RELEASED BY THE
HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member Pappas, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the men and women of the United States Army.

Since 1948, the Caisson Platoon of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment – "The Old Guard" – has carried deceased service members to their final resting place on the hallowed grounds of Arlington National Cemetery (ANC). The horse-drawn caisson funeral procession, a symbol of our nation's respect and gratitude, is one of the most recognized traditions in our military. Recognizing the profound importance of the caisson operations, the United States Army is unwavering in its commitment to continuing this solemn duty for those eligible and rendering honors to those who have served our nation.

In recent years it became clear that previous practices and resourcing created conditions that were counter to sustaining a healthy herd of horses in support of this important mission. The Army is fully committed to resuming caisson operations in support of our deserving service members, veterans, and their families. To ensure the long-term viability of the Caisson Platoon, the Army must resume operations in a way that ensures the wellbeing of the herd, the sustainability of the program, and avoids future disruptions.

To do this, the Army is taking a conditions-based approach to the resumption of caisson services. Resumption of caisson services on a preset timeline, before the requisite conditions are met, could jeopardize the health, safety, and welfare of the working equids. Resuming caisson operations too quickly and without an adequate number of fully trained horses could create a scenario in which otherwise minor incidents of illness or injury could cause disruptions to, or cessation of services. We want to ensure that once caisson operations resume, families can be assured they will have this option available to them with no further disruption.

The Army's plan to resume operations includes several key milestones that will set the conditions for continuous operations without future disruption. The milestones associated with this plan are focused on five key areas: facility renovation and land acquisition, horse procurement, horse health and fitness, horse and Soldier training and assessment, and talent management.

Facility Renovation and Land Acquisition

Ensuring adequate facilities for our horses and Soldiers is one of the first essential conditions to resuming and sustaining caisson operations. The herd requires adequate stabling as well as training and turn-out acreage. The historic stables at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall (JBM-HH), built in 1908, have housed the caisson horses for more than 70 years but no longer meet the requirements of a modern equine care facility. These facilities were built when adequate pasture and turn-out areas for horses existed in and around Fort Myer. For almost 120 years, urban growth and internments at ANC have reduced pastureland, now nearly nonexistent, impacting our ability to adequately maintain the health and fitness of the herd.

Increased requirements led the Army in 1985 to establish a 10-acre facility at Fort Belvoir, VA, providing six acres of turn-out space and an off-site training and sustainment facility for a larger herd. While this facility added additional acreage for training and turn-out beyond what was available on Fort Myer, the construction of the facilities and relatively limited acreage still did not meet commonly held baseline standards within the equestrian community.

Thanks to support from Congress, facility renovations are underway at the historic caisson stables on Fort Myer. Renovating the caisson stables is necessary to ensure we

can properly care for the horses on Fort Myer when they are supporting caisson operations within ANC. Renovations include improved ventilation and drainage, enlarged stalls, and industry-standard flooring designed to promote better health and reduce strain on the horses. The Army has contracted with a private equine center to provide high-quality care and turn-out space for the horses until the renovations are complete. This interim solution has proven vital to building capacity with our growing herd while ensuring they receive equine industry-standard care to maintain their health and fitness while training to resume support within ANC.

Additionally, report language contained in H. Rept. 118-301 (p. 1035-6), which accompanied the FY 2024 NDAA, directed the Secretary of the Army to conduct a study to address the feasibility and advisability of establishing sufficient stabling, pastures, and training areas for the equines in the Caisson Platoon of the 3rd United States Infantry; this report was submitted to the oversight committees in April of 2024 and made a number of important recommendations. As a result, the Army determined that a suitable site for the Caisson Platoon herd should encompass a minimum of 100 acres of land for grazing and exercise, in addition to contiguous land for essential equine wellness facilities such as stables, exercise equipment, barns, and staff housing. This approach for adequate land for grazing and exercise was endorsed by civilian equine experts and the recently added equine highly qualified expert (HQE) assigned to the Military District of Washington (MDW). The Army intends to expand the herd to approximately 80 horses to ensure sufficient capability to support caisson funeral processions. The Army is actively seeking sites capable of accommodating this increased capacity.

Working through the Real Estate Division in the Military Programs Directorate of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, we have identified a suitable site that meets the

Caisson Platoon's operational requirements while upholding safety and animal welfare standards. We are currently working through the approval, authorization, and resourcing process with the Department of Defense and Congress.

Horse Procurement

The second essential condition that must be met prior to resuming caisson support is sufficient herd size to afford working equids with the appropriate work-rest cycle, maintain uninterrupted operations at ANC and retain capability for State Funeral. The Army has determined four squads is the appropriate size of the herd to begin limited operations. This would allow two squads to work and provide funeral services while stabled at JBM-HH, while two squads rest at the Northern Equestrian Center. As of September 25th, 2024, the Army has two trained squads and is in the process of procuring horses for the third squad. The full procurement and training cycle for a squad is approximately six months. This timeline includes horse acquisition, individual and collective training, wagon hitch training, individual training for each specialized position in the squad, and collective training as an operational squad. As there are many factors that go into successfully procuring horses capable of this specialized mission, it is very difficult to predict when we will have four squads procured and fully trained. For this reason, it is critical for the resumption of services to be conditions-based rather than set by a particular timeline.

The size of the herd when caisson services resume directly correlates to wait times for families scheduling services at ANC. Over 2,200 military funeral honors with escort services have been scheduled since the pause of caisson operations at ANC over a year ago. Currently 34 families have opted to wait for the return of caisson services. Prior to the

pause, the Army executed approximately 30 caisson services per week with an average wait time of 39 weeks. The Army intends to resume operations when conditions are met to conduct at least 20 funerals in a week period. This will allow us to offer a substantial number of services per week and ensure the wait list does not become unmanageable for families, while ensuring the health of the herd is sustainably managed.

Modernizing the procurement of Military Working Equines (MWEs) is critical component to resuming full operations and ensuring we have a system to sustain the herd well into the future. We have retired 39 horses from the Caisson Platoon since March of 2023. These horses served for varying durations and were retired due to age, medical profile, years of service, or a combination of these factors. Since June 2023, the Caisson Platoon has acquired 24 horses selected for their physical strength, calm temperament, and suitability for ceremonial duties. The procurement process is rigorous, involving expert evaluations and assessments to ensure the horses meet the stringent demands of caisson activities. However, acquiring horses that can perform under the unique conditions of ANC, including navigating challenging terrain and carrying out precise ceremonial duties, requires careful selection and ongoing evaluation.

Based on insights from our highly qualified experts and leaders from other equestrian programs, some horses may adapt poorly to wagon hitch driving after procurement. Only some horses are suited to support the caisson mission, potentially impacting projected milestones to rebuild capacity within the herd. For example, this past June, we identified 30 horses of the appropriate breed available for purchase. Of those, 11 horses met the screening criteria by our experts, but only two passed the physical screening criteria. Despite these challenges, we are working closely with equestrian experts, veterinarians, and trainers to responsibly expand the herd and develop a

sustainable supply of well-suited horses well into the future.

Horse Health and Fitness

The health and fitness of our horses are paramount to the caisson program's sustainability. We have implemented a comprehensive fitness program addressing the physical and mental well-being of the horses, including tailored exercise regimens, nutritional plans, and regular veterinary assessments to monitor each horse's fitness and overall health. The Army has contracted equine fitness professionals to provide additional expertise in maintaining the herd's health. Our goal is to provide for the holistic health of the horses and ensure that they are fit to carry out the demanding tasks of caisson duty. This holistic approach aims to prevent injuries, manage stress, and extend the working lives of our horses, ensuring they remain fit for the demanding ceremonial duties at Arlington National Cemetery well into the future. Ensuring our Soldiers and horses are adequately trained for this unique mission is equally important to maintaining the herd's health and fitness. Additionally, we are working closely with the equine community and industry to modernize tack, improve saddle fit, and lighten the weight of a caisson while preserving historic design features.

Horse and Soldier Training and Assessment

Training and assessments are crucial to preparing horses and Soldiers for the rigorous demands of caisson operations. We have restructured our training programs to meet the highest horsemanship and ceremonial precision standards. This includes training horses and our Soldiers with the required skills to handle and care for the animals. Soldiers undergo advanced horsemanship and hitch-driving training guided by expert

instructors from the U.S. equestrian community. These programs are designed to ensure that horses and riders are fully prepared for the unique challenges of caisson work. Additionally, our partnership with the U.S. Park Police allows us to provide desensitization training, helping horses acclimate to the noise, movement, and terrain of Washington, D.C. This training is essential for ensuring that horses remain calm and controlled while supporting funeral processions and other state ceremonies.

Talent Management

Recruiting and retaining talent is the final milestone in our plan, which is required to sustain the Caisson program well into the future. Caisson operations require specialized skills in handling the horses and conducting ceremonial duties. To meet these needs, we are actively recruiting Soldiers interested in equine work and providing them with the necessary training to become proficient in caisson operations. Additionally, we are working to ensure that these Soldiers have clear career pathways within the Army so they can continue to grow, develop, and contribute with their unique expertise over time. The Army is also exploring integrating civilian equine professionals into the program and continually improving access to the best practices in equine care, training, and facility management. This combination of internal training and external expertise will help us build and sustain a world-class caisson program for years.

The Army remains committed to resuming full and sustainable caisson operations at ANC. While progress continues across our five critical areas, much work remains. We must ensure caisson conveyance resumes in a way that maintains the dignity and solemnity of the service while prioritizing the well-being of our horses and our Soldiers. We owe this to the American people and the horses entrusted in our care.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the men and women of the United States Army and for your generous and unwavering support of our outstanding Soldiers, veterans, and their families.