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Oversight Hearing for “Our Nation’s Hallowed Grounds: Review of America’s National Cemetery Funeral Operations for Veterans and Servicemembers”
Opening Statement Before the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

Mr. Chairman, Congressman Pappas, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs. I am honored to be with you today. I join you today as an equestrian advisor, having begun riding at the age of six, and currently living on a small Virginia horse farm, sharing seven horses with my incredible wife of 36 years.

My equestrian path was somewhat unusual in that I initially left horses at home at the age of eighteen to enlist in the U.S. Navy, serving as a Machinist’s Mate on the USS Nassau (LHA 4) before two Chief Petty Officers pushed me down the path to become an officer. I ultimately retired from the Navy after over 37 years in uniform, being blessed to lead thousands of amazing men and women afloat and ashore. During my wife’s and my Navy journey we moved back and forth across the country pulling a horse trailer, living in and participating in equestrian activities in eight states, ultimately settling in northern Virginia.

Beyond owning, riding, and loving horses for nearly 55 years, I have served on the Board of Directors and Executive Committee of the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF), the national governing body for equestrian sport, for the past four years. I also am a Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI) licensed Dressage Steward and a USEF licensed Dressage Technical Delegate, officiating at equestrian competitions across the U.S. and internationally.

I first became involved with assisting The Old Guard’s Caisson Platoon in July 2023 after learning of the extent of horse welfare, personnel, training, and equipment issues facing the unit. I reached out to Major General Bredenkamp offering my support, which he enthusiastically accepted. Along with Lieutenant Colonel Art Perritt, U.S. Army (Retired), a former Old Guard Honor Company Commander, long time horseman, and former FEI equestrian official, we have arranged for a group of top American and British equestrian experts to advise the Army (pro bono), as well as offered ongoing advisory assistance when requested to the Military District of Washington, The Old Guard, and the Provisional Caisson Detachment.

Why did our Army get to this point where it has been unable to execute the caisson mission for nearly two years? Historically, the military took care of their horses as they did any other Soldier because to do otherwise invites failure on the battlefield. Today’s military takes care of its canine, carrier pigeon and dolphin Soldiers, but over the past 25-plus years has lost the intrinsic knowledge of how to care for the equine Soldier. The quality of life of an Army horse should not be less than that of the Soldier for the horse is also a member of our national defense force. Deliberate abuse can never be tolerated for any member of the armed services and training should be directly related to each member’s mission. However, those responsible for care at all levels should remain aware that there are distinctions between a civilian sport horse and a military working horse. They are Soldiers, not contestants, and live a life upon which the athletes loosely base their sport.

Any periodic evaluation of the unit's objectives over the past 25 years would have revealed a high rate of injury, abnormal dependency on veterinarian intervention and delayed retirement. At a minimum the first metric observed by the Army should have been 'do no harm' with all its implied actions and performance evaluations. The goal should be to treat the horse as a Soldier who is prepared through proper support to execute their mission which, primarily, is a six-horse team pulling a caisson without cannon or ammunition over a well-maintained road surface at a solemn walking pace.

Simple analysis, within the tenets of Occam's Razor, of what had changed between the mechanized post World War II and early 1980's period when the Caisson Platoon was successfully operating under the influence of knowledgeable leaders such as CW4 John McKinney, who led the unit from 1959-1974, a period during which both the M1928 McClellan saddle and historic caissons were successfully used, and the present would reveal a spreading ignorance of horses by unit leadership and a reliance on narrowly focused, profitable civil training programs that required no institutional knowledge on the part of the Army. The failures stem from ill-informed human priorities for land management and training, not the weight of the caisson, style of saddle, cobblestone aiseways or color of horse. Photographs and posted videos over the last 25 years show ill fitted tack and dangerous training practices, not with evil intent, but from ignorance and a lack of cognizant oversight.

From my first meeting with Major General Bredekamp, it was apparent that he understood that the Caisson Platoon's culture needed to change from the top down to resolve these issues. Much has been accomplished over the past couple of years, but key doctrinal and manpower issues remain unresolved, and it has taken an inordinate amount of time to implement a synchronized, comprehensive training program. Likewise, there have been numerous unnecessary equipment purchases, poor civilian personnel selections, and costly contracts. Much of this has been due to a lack of professional military equestrian personnel and detrimental civilian hiring and contracting processes.

I believe the Army sincerely desires to fix most of the issues now facing the program, but it will not succeed without a core group of permanently assigned military officer equestrian experts (like CW4 John McKinney), implementation of effective Army equestrian program doctrine, an operational synchronized training program, permanent civilian direct hiring authority, and more effective contracting processes. Without these, I am concerned that the fate of the program may only survive perhaps one or two cycles of leadership and collapse again to the detriment of the horses and the military ceremonial mission.

To avoid a continuation of the path which has resulted in the enormous amounts of tax dollars being spent and the long-term denial of earned honors, the Secretary of the Army would be well advised to develop a plan based on existing historical documents, tempered with modern innovations and current safety concerns for both horse and Soldier, to accomplish and sustain long-term within a reasonable budget, the stated mission with a military staff. This plan needs civilian staffing on a temporary basis to establish an education baseline, horse and rider training programs, stable facilities, horse procurement and equipment selection, but should transition quickly to a military program with the appropriate position staffing and training, and with limited civilian support.