

STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
ON  
"MEMORIALIZING VETERANS: OUTREACH, UPKEEP, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS"  
AT VETERANS CEMETERIES  
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Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member McGarvey, and other Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) to testify today at this oversight hearing on the sacred work of memorializing our nation's service members and veterans at military cemeteries around the world. Across generations, Americans have answered the call to serve, often at the cost of extraordinary personal sacrifice. For those who have laid down their lives in defense of this nation and its ideals, our collective responsibility to honor their legacy does not end when the fighting stops but endures in perpetuity.

### **ABMC's Mission and Structure**

Since its establishment on March 4, 1923, the American Battle Monuments Commission has carried out a singular mission: to honor the service, achievements, and sacrifice of the more than 200,000 U.S. service members buried and commemorated at our sites. Today, ABMC operates and maintains 26 U.S. military cemeteries and 31 federal memorials, monuments, and commemorative plaques in 17 countries, including the United States. Built to memorialize America's war dead and the service of our Armed Forces overseas, these sites stand as permanent expressions of our nation's gratitude and respect. As General George C. Marshall observed, ABMC's cemeteries are "the most moving and impressive evidence of the sacrifices made by the United States in the cause of freedom."

ABMC is governed by a Board of Commissioners consisting of up to 11 members appointed by the President of the United States, who serve without compensation. There are currently nine appointed commissioners, one of whom is elected Chairman. The Board establishes agency policy and provides oversight to ensure fulfillment of the Commission's mission. Day-to-day operations are led by a Presidentially appointed Secretary—currently unfilled— supported by a career Deputy Secretary. ABMC maintains administrative offices in Arlington, Virginia, and Paris, France. The Commission has more than 500 U.S. and locally employed staff. Together, these professionals care for our cemeteries and memorials, assist families and visitors, and advance the agency's educational, interpretive, and commemorative programs.

ABMC's mission differs in important ways from that of other federal entities responsible for military and veterans cemeteries. With the exception of three monuments in the United States, all of our sites are overseas. Our cemeteries and memorials are not only sacred places of remembrance, but completed works of civic art, where architecture, sculpture, and landscape design were intentionally integrated to honor sacrifice and inspire reflection. Unlike most national cemeteries, nearly all ABMC cemeteries honor only the war dead and are closed to new burials, allowing our focus to remain on the perpetual preservation of historic sites and the stories they represent. In addition to maintaining these places to the highest standards, we are entrusted with ensuring that the service and sacrifice of those we honor continue to be understood and remembered by future generations.

### **ABMC's Standard of Care**

ABMC's cemeteries and memorials are among the most beautiful and meticulously maintained commemorative sites in the world. Maintaining them to a standard worthy of the men and women we honor

is central to our mission. More than 350 true masters of their crafts—gardeners, masons, mechanics, maintenance professionals, and technical specialists are dedicated to caring for 1,075 acres of cemetery and memorial grounds across a wide range of climates and environments. Our sites experience heavy traffic, with millions visiting annually, yet they are also managed and maintained to eliminate visible deterioration whenever possible. At Normandy American Cemetery alone, more than 860 next of kin or family members visited in 2025 among 1.5 million from the general public,

The original architectural and horticultural designs of our sites are not merely aesthetic features—they are integral components of the memorials themselves. Every pathway, planting, prospect, and monument was intentionally designed to inspire reflection, remembrance, and reverence. Through rigorous maintenance, preservation, renovation, and restoration guided by established preservation practices, ABMC ensures these sacred sites continue to convey their intended meaning and dignity for future generations.

Conceived by some of the most renowned architects, artists, and craftsmen of their time, ABMC's cemeteries and memorials are not only places of remembrance but also cultural and historic treasures. Their preservation is both a solemn responsibility and a lasting expression of our nation's gratitude to those who served and sacrificed.

### **Commemorative Ceremonies and Special Events**

In addition to welcoming visitors 363 days each year, ABMC honors America's fallen through a robust program of commemorative events. Across our sites, we conduct nearly 60 ceremonies annually, including Memorial Day and Veteran's Day observances, major campaign anniversaries, and other significant commemorations as well as numerous wreath-layings for small groups and VIP visitors. These events bring together veterans, family members, U.S. and allied military representatives, elected officials, and community partners to reflect on the service and sacrifice of those we honor.

This year's Memorial Day commemorations welcomed more than 15,000 visitors across ABMC's 26 cemeteries, including next of kin and families. At the Netherlands American Cemetery, U.S. Africa Command Commander General Dagvin Anderson served as keynote speaker while also paying tribute as a family member of the fallen. General Anderson is the great-nephew of Army Sgt. Harold Jonathan, who was killed in action on November 29, 1944, during intense combat operations along the Western Front in Germany. His participation served as a powerful reminder that the sacrifices commemorated at our sites continue to resonate across generations.

Earlier this month, more than 1,500 guests attended the D-Day commemoration at Normandy American Cemetery, including 32 World War II veterans. Among them was 107-year-old U.S. Navy Lt. Arthur Rose, who commanded naval vessels supporting the landings on June 6, 1944. During the ceremony, Lt. Rose read from a letter he wrote to his parents shortly after D-Day, offering those in attendance a rare and deeply personal connection to one of history's defining moments.

ABMC is also occasionally entrusted with the solemn privilege of providing a final resting place for service members whose remains are identified decades after their deaths. Because most ABMC cemeteries commemorate those who served in the First and Second World Wars, burial eligibility is generally limited to service members from those conflicts whose remains are subsequently identified. One such case began on February 8, 2022, when human remains believed to be those of a World War I soldier were discovered in a field near Villers-sur-Fère, France. Following an extensive, year-long effort involving multiple organizations to confirm the remains were American, the unknown service member was interred with full military honors at Oise-Aisne American Cemetery on June 7, 2023. The burial marked the first interment of a previously unidentified World War I service member at an ABMC cemetery since 1988 and the first burial at Oise-Aisne since the cemetery was dedicated in 1937.

### **The Fallen Service Members Religious Heritage Restoration Program**

Jewish Americans have served with distinction in every major conflict in our nation's history. Yet during the First and Second World Wars, incomplete military records and concerns about antisemitic persecution sometimes resulted in Jewish service members being buried beneath Latin crosses rather than Stars of

David. Historians and researchers believe that hundreds of Jewish American service members may have been affected by these errors.

Since 2018, ABMC has partnered with Operation Benjamin, a nonprofit organization dedicated to identifying and correcting such cases. Through extensive historical and genealogical research, Operation Benjamin helps verify a service member's faith and supports requests to replace incorrect headstones. Most recently, on June 2, ABMC installed five new Star of David headstones at Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery in France. These replacements brought the total number of corrected headstones at ABMC sites to 32, ensuring that those service members are commemorated in accordance with their faith and family heritage.

Earlier this month, following direction from Congress, ABMC announced the launch of the Fallen Servicemembers Religious Heritage Restoration Program. Through a competitively awarded federal contract, the program establishes dedicated support for the research, identification, and correction of burial marker discrepancies involving Jewish American service members. Together, ABMC and Operation Benjamin, the selected provider, are helping ensure that those who gave their lives in service to our country are remembered accurately and honored beneath the symbol of faith that shaped their lives.

### **ABMC Flower Program**

On May 14, ABMC launched its new Flower Program at [ABMCFlowerProgram.com](http://ABMCFlowerProgram.com), providing families, friends, and supporters with a simple way to honor service members buried or memorialized at ABMC sites around the world. The program offers both online and telephone ordering for floral arrangements placed at any of ABMC's 26 overseas cemeteries and three U.S. memorials: the East Coast Memorial in New York City, the West Coast Memorial in San Francisco, and the Honolulu Memorial at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii.

Through the website, customers can search for a service member by name, select a delivery date, and include a personalized message. ABMC staff place the arrangements at the appropriate gravesite or Wall of the Missing and can provide a commemorative photograph documenting the placement. Since its launch, the program has received 74 orders.

For many families, the distance created by an overseas burial can make it difficult to regularly visit and tend the graves of their loved ones. The ABMC Flower Program helps bridge that distance by providing a meaningful, accessible way to honor the memory of fallen service members throughout the year, regardless of where family members may live.

### **Corozal American Cemetery and Clark Veterans Cemetery**

While ABMC has cared for American military cemeteries for more than a century, only two cemeteries under our care remain open to new burials: Corozal American Cemetery in Panama and Clark Veteran's Cemetery in the Philippines. Burial requests at both sites are administered by ABMC and evaluated using Department of Veteran's Affairs burial eligibility criteria to the extent practicable. On average, Corozal conducts approximately 27 burials annually, while Clark receives roughly 65.

ABMC assumed responsibility for Corozal American Cemetery in 1982 following implementation of the Panama Canal Treaty. Today, the nearly 17-acre cemetery serves as the final resting place for more than 5,600 U.S. military veterans and others. To ensure the cemetery remains capable of serving future generations, ABMC is developing a comprehensive long-range plan focused on preservation, infrastructure improvements, burial operations, and future capacity. In March of this year, a cross-functional team representing Engineering, Visitor Services, Information Technology, Horticulture, Security, Cemetery Operations, and the agency's contract Executive Architect conducted a site assessment and met with community stakeholders, including representatives of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion. The resulting plan is intended to guide the cemetery's development and stewardship over the next 15 to 20 years.

Clark Veteran's Cemetery came under ABMC management in 2013 through Public Law 112-260. The cemetery had suffered significant damage following the June 15, 1991, eruption of Mount Pinatubo, which forced the evacuation of Clark Air Base and left the grounds covered in volcanic ash and debris. Since assuming responsibility for the site, ABMC has undertaken an extensive revitalization effort that has included removing substantial volcanic deposits, restoring historic landscapes, repairing widespread headstone damage, upgrading infrastructure, and enhancing the overall appearance and functionality of the cemetery. The transformation of Clark Veteran's Cemetery from a heavily damaged site into the dignified and meticulously maintained cemetery stands as one of the most remarkable restoration achievements in ABMC's history.

### **Disinterment of Unknown Service Members**

During the First and Second World Wars, the U.S. government offered families of the fallen the opportunity to choose whether to repatriate their loved ones' remains to the United States or bury them in permanent overseas cemeteries near the battlefields where they perished, alongside those with whom they served. During both wars, roughly 40% chose burial overseas. While these men and women account for the vast majority of the crosses and Stars of David at our sites, more than 7,500 headstones mark the graves of unknown Americans from these conflicts. For decades, ABMC has faithfully cared for these individuals, tending their graves while loved ones at home continued to wait for answers and closure.

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) estimates that 38,000 of the more than 80,000 remaining missing U.S. service members are recoverable, with the remainder lost at sea. Under an interagency agreement with DPAA, ABMC supports up to 100 disinterments annually from Manila American Cemetery in the Philippines and 75 from ABMC's WWII cemeteries across Europe. Once ABMC acknowledges a disinterment request, a carefully managed process begins to plan and coordinate the disinterments. This work is carried out with the utmost dignity and respect, ensuring minimal disruption to surrounding graves and a solemn transfer for forensic analysis.

This month, ABMC completed four disinterments of unknown remains at Florence American Cemetery, bringing the agency's total to more than 1,300 disinterments since the establishment of our overseas WWII cemeteries. When DPAA confirms an identification, ABMC places a bronze rosette beside the service member's name on the Walls of the Missing at the appropriate cemetery or memorial. More than 94,000 service members are commemorated on ABMC's Walls of the Missing.

One such identification was U.S. Army Air Forces 2nd Lt. William J. McGowan. McGowan's P-47 Thunderbolt crashed on D-Day near Moon-sur-Elle, France, and he was initially declared non-recoverable. After the site was resurveyed by DPAA in 2010 and excavated in 2018, DPAA scientists officially accounted for him on May 13, 2019. Nearly 80 years after his death, McGowan was laid to rest at Normandy American Cemetery on July 9, 2022.

McGowan's story also illustrates an important decision faced by many families when a missing service member is identified. After a military service casualty assistance officer notifies the next of kin of a positive identification, families—like those of the First and Second World Wars before them—may choose burial in the United States or interment at an ABMC cemetery overseas. Often, these decisions are made by children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, or other relatives on behalf of parents, spouses, and siblings who have long since passed away. In many cases, families elect to repatriate the remains for burial at home. Because ABMC is not directly involved in the notification process, we have limited opportunities to share information about our cemeteries and the eligibility of these service members for interment overseas. We welcome opportunities to work more closely with the military services' casualty assistance programs to ensure families are aware of all available options and have access to information about ABMC's cemeteries, mission, and the support we can provide as they consider this deeply personal decision.

### **ABMC's Education, Outreach, and Interpretive Programs**

For more than a century, the American Battle Monuments Commission has served as the lead U.S. government agency responsible for honoring the service and sacrifice of America's Armed Forces through the care of military cemeteries, memorials, and monuments overseas. While stewardship of these sacred sites remains at the core of our mission, ABMC also recognizes an equally important responsibility: ensuring that the stories of those we commemorate continue to be understood and remembered by future generations. Through education, outreach, visitor services, and interpretation, the Commission works to connect the American public and international audiences with the individuals, events, and ideals represented at our sites.

ABMC's educational initiatives provide educators, students, and lifelong learners with opportunities to engage more deeply with military history and remembrance. The agency offers lesson plans, educational briefings, interactive digital maps, and other classroom resources that help bring the stories of America's overseas military service into schools and communities. In partnership with France's National Office for Veterans and War Victims, ABMC is currently developing a traveling educational trunk that will introduce students to the design, symbolism, and commemorative purpose of American and French military cemeteries, fostering a greater understanding of the shared sacrifices that shaped both nations.

As the generations with direct connections to the world wars continue to pass, ABMC has expanded its outreach efforts to forge new relationships and engage new audiences. The agency regularly works with veterans and military service organizations, conducts briefings for civic and community groups, and collaborates with international partners and counterpart agencies responsible for military remembrance and heritage preservation. Last month, ABMC—in partnership with our non-profit partner the American Battle Monuments Foundation and the United War Veterans Council—hosted a group of post-9/11 Gold Star Mothers at several of our cemeteries in France, providing them an opportunity to connect personally to our sites through their own experience of loss. Through partnerships with organizations like the Smithsonian American Art Museum, National Park Service, the National World War I and World War II Museums, and the National Flag Foundation, ABMC is helping encourage reflection about the service and sacrifice commemorated at its sites.

At the center of these efforts is ABMC's Visitor Services and Interpretation program. The agency operates ten visitor centers worldwide and employs a professional team of interpretive guides who provide free guided tours, educational presentations, and visitor engagement programs at our sites. Their mission is not simply to convey historical facts, but to encourage reflection, foster understanding, and inspire personal connections to the stories of those who served. The quality of ABMC's interpretive program has attracted interest from international organizations seeking to learn from the agency's expertise in commemorative storytelling and visitor engagement. Most recently, ABMC dedicated a newly redesigned visitor center at Cambridge American Cemetery. Here, our team has created an enhanced experience—including the agency's first dedicated children's content—that connects visitors with the stories of the more than 3,800 Americans buried there and the broader history of Allied operations in Europe.

Underlying these efforts is ABMC's Comprehensive Interpretive Plan, which provides a strategic framework for visitor experience, educational programming, and storytelling across the agency. The plan identifies core themes and messages, guides the development of new exhibits and interpretive products, and supports site-specific storytelling that reflects both local history and ABMC's broader mission. It also emphasizes accessibility, audience engagement, staff development, and collaboration with cemetery personnel to ensure interpretation remains relevant, effective, and responsive to changing visitor expectations.

Ultimately, ABMC's educational and interpretive work reflects a simple but enduring principle: remembrance requires more than preservation alone. The cemeteries, memorials, and monuments in our care are powerful physical reminders of sacrifice, but their full meaning is realized only when their stories are shared. Through education, outreach, and interpretation, ABMC helps ensure that the service, sacrifice, and achievements of those we honor continue to inspire future generations both in the United States and around the world.

## **Virtual Outreach**

Last May, ABMC joined the Department of Veterans Affairs in its efforts to further expand the Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM), the nation's largest online memorial space dedicated to veterans and service members. Through this partnership, VLM added 210,000 new service member pages for those Americans interred and honored at ABMC cemeteries and memorials. The collaboration between VA and ABMC adds these interactive memorial pages to the more than ten million entries already in the VLM and allows us to share the stories of our fallen service members with an even broader audience. Additionally, a relaunch of ABMC's Burial and Memorialization Electronic Directory online at [weremember.abmc.gov](http://weremember.abmc.gov) and through new touch-screen kiosks in our ten visitor centers enhances access to visitors and researchers to explore our full listing of burial records.

In 2022, we introduced a series of ABMC Virtual 360s, which expanded digital accessibility to our 26 overseas cemeteries and three U.S. based memorials. These immersive educational tools let users explore our sites from anywhere in the world. The digital environments can house additional explorable content, and our team is currently piloting a content series that highlights individual stories of service and sacrifice through the voices of our professional interpretive guides. These 360s have proven to be useful educational aids and planning tools and are especially valuable to families unable to travel internationally to see our sites in person.

This past March, ABMC launched its Online Catalog at [wepreserve.abmc.gov](http://wepreserve.abmc.gov), providing virtual access to thousands of historic photographs, artifacts, blueprints, furniture, art, and architectural molds. Each of the objects in the ABMC Online Catalog tells a part of ABMC's story, spanning more than 100 years. In addition to the Virtual 360 tours of ABMC's 26 cemeteries, the Online Catalog allows broader exploration of our materials and artifacts which are rarely on public display. In our monthly Curator's Collection, our staff feature items from within the catalog to showcase a unique part of the agency's history. This tool has also allowed us to expand our digital partnership footprint, introducing ABMC's mission to new audiences and generations.

## **Closing**

Mr. Chairman, in closing, I want to thank you and the Subcommittee for your continued interest in the care of the sites where so many of our nation's fallen sons and daughters are buried and memorialized.

In February 1920, then-Assistant Secretary of War Ralph Hayes traveled to Europe to help identify permanent burial locations for America's World War I dead. In the report that followed, he not only recommended the sites that would become our first overseas cemeteries and memorials but also urged the creation of a commission to ensure their perpetual care.

Hayes wrote, "All that a government can do will seem incomplete and barren if it not be accompanied by some evidence of the tenderness and sympathy and understanding that is due from the nation at large to those of its number who did not come out from the valley of shadow."

More than a century later, that charge remains at the heart of ABMC's mission. Our responsibility extends beyond maintaining immaculate grounds, preserving historic monuments, or caring for rows of marble headstones. We are entrusted with preserving the meaning behind these places—ensuring that the courage, sacrifice, and service of those who rest there continues to be understood and remembered by future generations.

The cemeteries and memorials in our care stand as enduring expressions of a grateful nation. They remind us not only of what was sacrificed, but of what was secured through that sacrifice. As long as Americans continue to visit these sites and hear the stories they tell, those we honor will never be forgotten and, in the words of ABMC's first Chairman, General of the Armies John J. Pershing, "Time will not dim the glory of their deeds."

This concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have.