



WRITTEN TESTIMONY

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House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

"Memorializing our Veterans: Outreach, Upkeep, and Community Partnerships at Veterans Cemeteries"

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Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member McGarvey, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of Travis Manion Foundation (TMF), where we empower veterans and families of the fallen to lead by mentoring youth and serving in their communities.

I am honored to address the importance of memorializing our veterans and fostering community partnerships at veteran cemeteries across the country. My name is Ryan Manion, CEO of Travis Manion Foundation and sister of Marine Corps 1stLt Travis Manion, who made the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq in 2007. Travis is one of the many heroes of this generation buried in Section 60 at Arlington National Cemetery.

The Meaning of Memorialization

I visit my brother often, who rests just a few rows from my mother, Janet, who founded Travis Manion Foundation following his loss. Through the years, I have traveled to Arlington alone, with friends and family, and, since 2021, alongside hundreds of volunteers through TMF. Every time I step onto those hallowed grounds, I am struck not only by the beauty of that land, but by the thousands of white markers that represent the very best our country has to offer.

National cemeteries like Arlington are where the promises our nation makes to honor, remember, and care for our fallen heroes are made permanent.

Memorializing our fallen heroes is not simply about preserving their final resting places. It is about preserving their stories, their character, and the values they embodied so future generations can learn from their example. National cemeteries are not only places of remembrance; they are classrooms of citizenship, service, and sacrifice.

In 2007, my brother served with a small group of Marines on a Military Transition Team, helping train Iraqi forces to serve as a professional fighting force. Due to time, I will share the abbreviated version of Travis's sacrifice. On April 29, 2007, while conducting a routine patrol, his convoy came under enemy sniper fire. Several teammates were wounded and exposed to continued enemy fire. In response, Travis did what he had trained to do as a leader: he ran toward danger and moved his fellow Marines to safety. Every other member of his patrol survived that day, including those wounded in the initial attack. Travis did not.

My mother initially chose to bury Travis near our home outside Philadelphia. She knew it was his desire to be laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery, but she could not yet bear the thought of having him so far away. She wanted him close to her—physically and spiritually.

For that same reason, she founded Travis Manion Foundation. She wanted to ensure that Travis' life, values, and example would continue to impact others long after his death. Her vision was simple but powerful: empower veterans and families of the fallen to continue serving by helping develop the next generation of leaders.

Today, Travis Manion Foundation has grown into a movement of more than 300,000 Americans. Last year alone, over 14,000 volunteers served through our programs, making TMF the nation's largest veteran-led volunteer network.

My mother was a visionary who saw veterans not as broken or helpless, but as civic assets whose leadership remains essential long after they remove the uniform. Veterans, alongside families of the fallen, ensure the legacies of our nation's heroes endure and inspire future generations to follow their example of service. Since 2008, TMF has supported more than 80,000 veterans and families of the fallen through leadership development and personal growth programs, including training more than 3,000 Veteran Mentors to serve youth across the country.

Connecting Future Generations to Service and Sacrifice

Our Veteran Mentors share stories of our nation's fallen heroes while engaging young people in experiences that put character into action. One of the most powerful examples is visiting national cemeteries on and around Memorial Day.

This past Memorial Day, through official partnerships with Arlington National Cemetery and the National Cemetery Administration, TMF empowered more than 2,500 volunteers to visit 78 cemeteries nationwide. These volunteers placed commemorative tokens at the gravesites of 10,000 fallen service members through what we call The Honor Project. Through this effort, surviving family members and battle buddies know their loved ones are remembered even when they cannot visit in person. But the impact extends far beyond those families.

Volunteers leave with a deeper understanding of sacrifice, service, and citizenship. They learn the stories behind the headstones. They witness firsthand the care devoted to preserving these sacred spaces. Most importantly, they leave inspired to live guided by the same character these heroes demonstrated in life.

Programs like The Honor Project demonstrate how community partnerships can extend the mission of our national cemeteries beyond preservation and maintenance by creating opportunities for education, remembrance, and civic engagement.

Through these experiences, volunteers learn about heroes such as Navy Lt. Brendan Looney, a Navy SEAL and Travis's roommate at the United States Naval Academy. Brendan made the ultimate sacrifice on September 21, 2010, during his 59th combat mission in Afghanistan. After Brendan's death, my mother made the difficult decision to move Travis to Arlington National Cemetery, where he could rest beside his best friend and brother-in-arms. Today, these two warriors stand as a powerful reminder of friendship, sacrifice, and the enduring bonds forged in service to our nation.

The question before us is not whether our fallen heroes deserve to be remembered. The question is whether we will create meaningful opportunities for future generations to know who they were and why their service mattered.

Strengthening Remembrance Through Community Partnerships

In previous generations, military service was woven into the fabric of everyday American life. Veterans were our teachers, coaches, business owners, and neighbors. Today, less than 1% of Americans serve in uniform, creating a growing disconnect between those who serve and the communities they protect.

That reality makes intentional engagement more important than ever.

Through TMF, Americans from all backgrounds serve alongside veterans and families of the fallen. We are helping bridge the civilian-military divide—one service project, one conversation, and one relationship at a time.

We do this not only at national cemeteries during Memorial Day observances, but throughout the year. Young people participate in cemetery cleanups during the summer and fall. Volunteers help place wreaths during the winter. Communities visit veterans homes, engage with veterans, and learn the stories of those who served and sacrificed.

These partnerships transform remembrance into action. They ensure our national cemeteries remain places of learning, reflection, and connection—not only for those with a direct military connection, but for all Americans.

Conclusion

No single organization can shoulder the responsibility of teaching future generations about the character of our fallen heroes. No single organization can fully demonstrate that our national cemeteries carry far more than rows of headstones.

It takes all of us—government, communities, families, veterans organizations, and partners like TMF—to ensure these sacred places remain active sites of remembrance and education. When communities are engaged and partners are empowered to contribute, cemeteries are not simply maintained—they are actively remembered.

Before my brother deployed to Iraq for the second and final time, he was asked why he had to return so soon. His response was five simple words: "If Not Me, Then Who..."

Those five words have become the ethos of Travis Manion Foundation and our call to action. If we do not learn the stories of brave warriors like Travis Manion, Brendan Looney, and the thousands of service members who rest in our national cemeteries, how can we hope to emulate their example? How can we inspire future generations to carry forward the values they lived and died defending?

"If Not Me, Then Who..." is about continuing their legacy through lives of service, leadership, and character. Thank you for partnering with us in this important mission.