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STATEMENT OF

DIANE M. ZUMATTO
AMVETS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE
AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

OF THE

VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION

CONCERNING

SUSTAINING THE SACRED TRUST:
AN UPDATE ON OUR NATIONAL CEMETERIES

10:00 A.M., THURSDAY, 7 MARCH 2013
334 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

Chairman Runyan and Ranking Minority Member Titus and distinguished members of the subcommittee, as an author of *The Independent Budget (IB)* with responsibility for the NCA, I thank you for this opportunity to share with you AMVETS' views on the state of our National Cemeteries.

The most important obligation of the NCA is to honor the memory of America's brave men and women who have so selflessly served in the United States armed forces. Therefore there is no more sacrosanct responsibility than the dignified and respectful recovery, return and burial of our men and women in uniform. This responsibility makes it incumbent upon NCA to maintain our NCA cemeteries as national shrines dedicated to the memory of these heroic men and women.

Unfortunately, more often than not, our National Cemeteries, many of which are richly steeped in history and containing historic architecture, monuments, markers, landscapes and related memorial tributes, are under-valued and unappreciated by the majority of Americans. These venerable commemorative spaces are part of America's historic material culture; they are museums of art and American history; they are fields of honor and hallowed grounds and they deserve our most respectful stewardship.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) National Cemetery Administration (NCA) maintains 131 of the nation's 147 national cemeteries, as well as 33 soldiers' lots. The 131 NCA operated cemeteries are composed of approximately 3.1 million gravesites and are located in 39 states and Puerto Rico. As of late 2011, there were more than 20,191 acres within established installations in the NCA. Nearly 60 percent are yet to be developed and hold the potential to provide approximately 5.6 million more gravesites, composed of 5 million casket sites and nearly 601,000 in-ground cremation sites. Of these 131 national cemeteries, 72 are open to all interments, 18 can accommodate cremated remains only, and 41 perform only interments of family members in the same gravesite as a previously deceased family member.

VA estimates that approximately 22.2 million veterans are alive today, and with the transition of an additional 215,000 service members into veteran status over the next 12 months, this number is expected to continue to increase until approximately 2016 at which point it will begin declining for the next few years. These veterans have served in World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn, and hostile conflicts around the world as well as during times of peace. On average, 15.2 percent of veterans choose to be laid to rest in a national or state veterans' cemetery. As new national and state Veterans cemeteries open, this percentage is expected to increase. In addition, NCA plans to further increase access for rural Veterans by establishing National Veterans Burial Grounds in existing public or private cemeteries in eight sparsely populated rural locations across the country.

Out of the 117,400 interments conducted in FY 2011, 65.5 percent were in the 20 busiest national cemeteries: Riverside, CA.; Florida National; Calverton, NY.; Fort Snelling, MN.; Jefferson Barracks, MO.; Fort Logan, CO.; Fort Sam Houston, TX; Willamette, OR.; Dallas-Fort Worth, TX; Fort Rosecrans, CA.; National Memorial Cemetery of Arizona; Abraham Lincoln, IL.; Tahoma, WA.; Houston, TX; Great Lakes, MI.; Sacramento Valley, CA.; Massachusetts; South Florida; Ohio Western Reserve; and Indiantown Gap, PA.

As of Sept. 30, 2011, eight national cemeteries each contained more than 100,000 occupied gravesites, collectively accounting for 39 percent of all NCA gravesites maintained: Long Island, N.Y.; Calverton, N.Y.; Riverside, Calif.; Fort Snelling, Minn.; Jefferson Barracks, Mo.; Willamette, Ore.; Golden Gate, Calif.; and Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

VA estimates that approximately 22.4 million veterans are alive today and with the transition of an additional 1 million service members into veteran status over the next 12 months, this number is expected to continue to rise until approximately 2017. On average, 14.4 percent of veterans choose a national or state veterans' cemetery as their final resting place. As new national and state cemeteries continue to open and as our aging veterans' population continues to grow, we continue to be a nation at war on multiple fronts. There is no doubt that the demand for burial at veterans' cemeteries will continue to increase.

AMVETS would like to acknowledge the dedication and commitment demonstrated by the NCA leadership and staff in their continued devotion to providing the highest quality of service to veterans and their families. It is the opinion of AMVETS that the NCA continues to meet its goals and the goals set forth by others because of its true dedication and care for honoring the memories of the men and women who have so selflessly served our nation. We applaud the NCA for recognizing that it must continue to be responsive to the preferences and expectations of the veterans' community by adapting or adopting new interment options and ensuring access to burial options in the national, state and tribal government-operated cemeteries.

One of the areas that NCA does a good job in is forecasting the future needs of our veterans by:

- securing land for additional cemeteries, including two new national cemeteries in Florida and working in CO & NY;
- getting the word out on burial benefits to stakeholders. Including developing new online resources for Funeral Directors;
- making it easier for family members to locate and chronicle loved ones by partnering with Ancestry.com to Index historic burial records. This partnership will bring burial records from historic national cemetery ledgers (predominantly of Civil War interments) into the digital age making them available to researchers and those undertaking historical and genealogical research. From the 1860s until the mid-20th century, U.S. Army personnel tracked national cemetery burials in hand-written burial ledgers or "registers." Due to concern for the fragile documents and a desire to expand public access to the ledger contents, VA's National Cemetery Administration (NCA) duplicated about 60 hand-written ledgers representing 36 cemeteries using a high-resolution scanning process. The effort resulted in high quality digital files that reproduced approximately 9,344 pages and 113,097 individual records. NCA then transferred the original ledgers to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) where they will be preserved. In addition to the NCA's ledgers, NARA was already the steward of at least 156 military cemetery ledgers transferred from the Army years ago.
- awarding grant money for State and Tribal Veterans Cemeteries; and
- expanding burial options in rural areas – **The Rural Initiative**. This program provides full burial services to small rural Veteran populations where there is no available burial option from either a VA national, State or Tribal Veterans cemetery. This initiative will build small *National Veterans Burial Grounds* in rural areas where the unserved Veteran population is less than 25,000 within a 75-mile radius. VA's current policy for establishing new national cemeteries is to build where the unserved Veteran population is 80,000 or more within a 75-mile radius.

A **National Veterans Burial Ground** will be a small three to five acre NCA-managed section within an existing public or private cemetery. NCA will provide a full range of burial options and

control the operation and maintenance of these lots. These sections will be held to the same National Shrine Standards as VA national cemeteries. Over the next six years VA plans to open eight *National Veterans Burial Grounds* in: Fargo, North Dakota; Rhinelander, Wisconsin; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Laurel, Montana; Idaho Falls, Idaho; Cedar City, Utah; Calais, Maine; and Elko, Nevada. This option will increase access to burial benefits to rural veterans and will help NCA to reach its strategic goal of providing a VA burial option to 94 percent of Veterans within a reasonable distance (75 miles) of their residence.

AMVETS also believes it is important to recognize the NCA's efforts in employing both disabled and homeless veterans, which is another area that NCA leads the way among federal agencies. Programs include:

- **The Homeless Veteran Supported Employment Program (HVSEP)** provides vocational assistance, job development and placement, and ongoing supports to improve employment outcomes among homeless Veterans and Veterans at-risk of homelessness. Formerly homeless Veterans who have been trained as Vocational Rehabilitation Specialists (VRSs) provide these services;
- **VA's Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) Program** is a national vocational program comprised of three unique programs which assist homeless Veterans in returning to competitive employment: Sheltered Workshop, Transitional Work, and Supported Employment. Veterans in CWT are paid at least the federal or state minimum wage, whichever is higher; VA's National Cemetery Administration and Veterans Health Administration have also formed partnerships at national cemeteries, where formerly homeless Veterans from the CWT program have received work opportunities; and
- **The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) VetSuccess Program** assists Veterans with service-connected disabilities to prepare for, find, and keep suitable jobs. Services that may be provided include: Comprehensive rehabilitation evaluation to determine abilities, skills, and interests for employment; employment services; assistance finding and keeping a job; and On the Job Training (OJT), apprenticeship, and non-paid work experiences.

Veterans Cemetery Grant Programs

The Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) complements the National Cemetery Administration's mission to establish gravesites for veterans in areas where it cannot fully respond to the burial needs of veterans. Since 1980, the VCGP has awarded more than \$482 million to 41 states, territories and tribal organizations for the establishment, expansion or improvement of 86 state veteran cemeteries. For example, the NCA can provide up to 100 percent of the development cost for an approved cemetery project, including establishing a new cemetery and expanding or improving an established state or tribal organization veterans' cemetery. New equipment, such as mowers and backhoes, can be provided for new cemeteries. In addition, the Department of Veterans' Affairs may also provide operating grants to help cemeteries achieve national shrine standards.

In FY 2012, with an appropriation of \$46 million, the VCGP funded 15 state cemeteries and one tribal organization cemetery. These grants included the establishment or ground breaking of one new state cemetery and one new tribal organization cemetery, expansions and improvements at ten state cemeteries, and six projects aimed at assisting state cemeteries to meet the NCA national shrine standards.

In fiscal year 2011, NCA-supported Veterans cemeteries provided nearly 29,500 interments. Since 1978 the Department of Veterans Affairs has more than doubled the available acreage and accommodated more than a 100 percent increase in burial through this program. The VCGP faces the challenge of meeting a growing interest from states to provide burial services in areas not currently served. The intent of the VCGP is to develop a true complement to, not a replacement for, our federal system of national cemeteries. With the enactment of the "Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 1998," the NCA has been able to strengthen its partnership with states and increase burial services to veterans, especially those living in less densely populated areas without access to a nearby national cemetery. Through FY 2012, the VCGP has provided grant funding to 88 state and tribal government veterans' cemeteries in 41 states and U.S. territories. In FY 2011 VA awarded its first state cemetery grant to a tribal organization.

This is an extremely cost effective program which will need to continue to grow in order to keep pace with ever increasing needs.

Veteran's Burial Benefits

Since the original parcel of land was set aside for the sacred committal of Civil War Veterans by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, more than 4 million burials, from every era and conflict, have occurred in national cemeteries under the National Cemetery Administration.

In 1973, the Department of Veterans' Affairs established a burial allowance that provided partial reimbursement for eligible funeral and burial costs. The current payment is \$2,000 for burial expenses for service-connected deaths, \$300 for nonservice-connected deaths and a \$700 plot allowance. At its inception, the payout covered 72 percent of the funeral costs for a service-connected death, 22 percent for a nonservice-connected death and 54 percent of the cost of a burial plot.

Burial allowance was first introduced in 1917 to prevent veterans from being buried in potter's fields. In 1923 the allowance was modified. The benefit was determined by a means test until it was removed in 1936. In its early history the burial allowance was paid to all veterans, regardless of their service connectivity of death. In 1973, the allowance was modified to reflect the status of service connection.

The plot allowance was introduced in 1973 as an attempt to provide a plot benefit for veterans who did not have reasonable access to a national cemetery. Although neither the plot allowance nor the burial allowance was intended to cover the full cost of a civilian burial in a private cemetery, the recent increase in the benefit's value indicates the intent to provide a meaningful benefit. AMVETS is pleased that the 111th Congress acted quickly and passed an increase in the plot allowance for certain veterans from \$300 to \$700 effective October 1, 2011.

However, we believe that there is still a serious deficit between the original value of the benefit and its current value. In order to bring the benefit back up to its original intended value, the payment for service-connected burial allowance should be increased to \$6,160, the nonservice-connected burial allowance should be increased to \$1,918 and the plot allowance should be increased to \$1,150. AMVETS believes Congress should divide the burial benefits into two categories: veterans within the accessibility model and veterans outside the accessibility model.

AMVETS further believes that Congress should increase the plot allowance from \$700 to \$1,150 for all eligible veterans and expand the eligibility for the plot allowance for all veterans who would be eligible for burial in a national cemetery, not just those who served during wartime. Congress should increase the service-connected burial benefits from \$2,000 to \$6,160 for veterans outside the radius threshold and to \$2,793 for veterans inside the radius threshold.

Additionally, AMVETS believes that Congress should increase the nonservice-connected burial benefits from \$300 to \$1,918 for all veterans outside the radius threshold and to \$854 for all veterans inside the radius threshold. The Administration and Congress should provide the resources required to meet the critical nature of the National Cemetery Administration's mission and to fulfill the nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country so honorably and faithfully.

Finally, AMVETS calls on Congress and the Administration to provide the resources required to meet the critical nature of the NCA mission so that it can fulfill the nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country so honorably and faithfully.

Does this mean that there are no areas needing improvement at NCA – absolutely not. From October 2011 through March 2012, NCA conducted an internal gravesite review of headstone and marker placements at VA National cemeteries. During that review a total of 251 discrepancies at 93 National cemeteries were discovered which included:

- 218 misplaced headstones;
- 25 unmarked graves;
- 8 misplaced veteran remains

While these incidents were corrected in a respectful, professional and expeditious manner, the initial phase of NCA's internal review failed to identify, and therefore to report, all misplaced headstones and unmarked gravesites. Additional discrepancies came to light thanks to the diligent oversight of Chairman Miller and the HVAC which had tasked the IG with conducting an audit of the internal NCA review. The IG report highlighted several concerns and made corrective recommendations. Based on those recommendations, the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs developed an appropriate action plan and AMVETS recommends continued oversight to ensure the carrying out of all corrective actions. This issue will be further explored in my oral remarks.

This concludes my written statement.

4 March 2013

The Honorable Representative Jon Runyan, Chairman
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance & Memorial Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives, Veterans Affairs Committee
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

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 relevant to the upcoming 7 March 2013, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance & Memorial Affairs hearing on *Sustaining the Sacred Trust: An Update on our National Cemeteries*.

Sincerely,

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

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 had five great-uncles in military service during WWII, while her father and an uncle served during the Korean War.

Ms. Zumatto is a former Women's Army Corps (WAC) member who was stationed in Germany and at Fort Bragg, NC. Ms. Zumatto was married to a CW4 aviator in the Washington Army National Guard and is the mother of four adult children. Two of Ms. Zumatto's children chose to carry on the family tradition by volunteering for 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.

Ms. Zumatto, who received her B.A. in Historic Preservation from the University of Mary Washington in 2005, has had a life-long passion for historic architecture, history and historic cemeteries.

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