



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific
2177 Puowaiua Drive
Honolulu HI 96813

March 24, 2010

In Reply Refer To: 899

Subject: Testimony of Gene E. Castagnetti
Director of the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific

I am opposed to House Concurrent Resolution No. 280 based on the following facts:

First, in January 1991, the Department of Veterans Affairs/National Cemetery Administration awarded \$4.7 million in a State Cemetery Grant to the State of Hawaii to develop the Oahu Veterans Cemetery in Kaneohe, on the island of Oahu.

At that time, 1991, the award was the largest in the 10 year history of the VA State Cemetery Grant Program. This Award was provided to the State of Hawaii because the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, known as the Punchbowl, was expected to reach capacity and be closed to first family casketed remains in July of 1991.

The VAVNCA State Cemetery Grant Program was designed to compliment the VA's National Cemetery System at that time provided half the cost needed to build the State Cemetery.

The total cost of the State Veteran Cemetery was estimated to be \$25 million, with the State receiving the money incrementally, with the VA providing one half and the State providing matching funds.

The above approval and funding by the Department of Veteran Affairs was predicated on the acceptance by the State government receiving the VA funding would follow, accept and be in compliance with VAVNCA policy and directives as it pertains to the VA National Cemeteries.

Hawaii's eight State Grant Veteran Cemeteries have given due diligence to follow VAVNCA Policy as is evident by the 2009 Triennial Review. House Concurrent Resolution No. 280 is an attempt by the sponsors to circumvent VAVNCA Policy as found in NCA Directive Manual 40-2 which outlines prohibited practices, two of which I will identify for the committee.

HCR No. 280 is the effort by special interest groups to avoid compliance with long standing NCA Policy which has treated all veterans as equals without partisan preference as to rank (officer or enlisted), race, component organization (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps or Coast Guard) religion, gender or military occupational specialty, war period or cause of death.

VA/NCA Policy applies to interment sections which specifically states the following: "Many burial sections in older national cemeteries bear names that define or categorize those decedents who could be buried in a particular section. Most notable were an officer's section, a nurses section, an enlisted section, a post section and a distinguished service section. The discrimination inherent therein is readily apparent. The use of such sections solely for those categories has long been terminated and any gravesite that is available within any of these old cemetery sections cannot be used without written permission of the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs/Director of Field Operations. The practice of establishing segregated sections for certain categories is no longer permitted."

Therefore, the HCR No. 280 legislation to set aside a special place in the Hawaii State Veteran's Cemeteries for those individuals who are veterans of the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, similar to Section 60 at Arlington National Cemetery would be considered a direct violation of VA/NCA Policy.

In addition, John R. Gingrich, Chief of Staff for the Honorable Eric K. Shinseki, Secretary of VA, responding to the placement of photographs on gravesites of deceased veterans in the Hawaii State Veterans Cemetery in Kaneohe was found to be in violation of the NCA National Standards for appearance and cemetery staff are directed to remove these non-floral items from the gravesites in order that we maintain a high appearance and standards at the cemetery.

In addition, the Chief of Staff for the Secretary of the VA reiterated that the VA exercises basic regulatory authority over grant funded State Veteran Cemeteries in order to insure these cemeteries maintain the same high appearance as VA National Cemeteries.

In accordance with 38 Code of Federal Regulations, Section 39.5, and General Standards for Maintenance and Operations in accordance with the National Shrine Standards Section 39.23. This is applicable to the display of photos and other memorial

objects or memorabilia of fallen soldiers as a means of families honoring their loved ones on the gravesite and grave marker.

The committee is to be advised that the policies at Arlington National Cemetery are Department of the Army Policy as developed by the Secretary of the Army and in no way meet the standards or are applicable to the VA/NCA Policy. Arlington National Cemetery has eligibility standards which are more restrictive than VA Eligibility Standards for veteran interments.

For example, Arlington National Cemetery interment requires subject named veteran to have died on active duty, be a designated retiree with more than 20 years or a Purple Heart or a Silver Star or higher recipient.

Every veteran interred in a National Cemetery or State Grant Veteran Cemetery receives the following: Military honors, a free burial plot or cremation niche, Presidential Memorial Certificate, burial flag, perpetual care of the gravesite or niche, a headstone, grave marker or niche cover which memorializes the service and sacrifice of the individual veteran.

As is the case of the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, general officers from the former Army Chief of Staff (Fred Weyand), astronauts (Ellison Onizuka) combat reporter (Ernie Pyle), the 31 Medal of Honor recipients interred in this national shrine, Sergeant Henry O. Hansen, USMC, one of the original flag raisers on Iwo Jima, are not buried in special category sections.

Creating special burial sections by category sets up a divisive criteria which will adversely impact on the readiness of the active duty armed forces, the brotherhood established among those who served their nation regardless of which war and defeats unit cohesion, the combat multiplier and unifying factor that makes the United States the envy of the world.

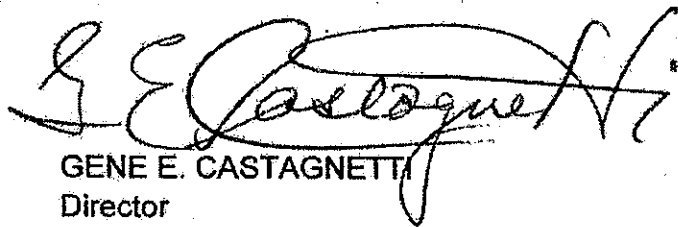
I would not want to have the State of Hawaii forced to repay the Department of Veterans Affairs, the approximately \$12 million they have received in State Grants for the current legislatures failure to honor the commitment of previous legislatures, government officials and the Governor who accepted the terms of the policies under which the State Grants Funding was provided.

It would be repugnant to the memories of the veterans of previous wars to now initiate or even consider separate status that differentiates between servicemen who gave their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan compared to those who might have fought in Kuwait, Bosnia, Grenada, Djibouti, World War II, Korea or Vietnam.

Any legislation which places veterans in categories is wrong, abhorrent, disingenuous and disrespectful to all other veterans who may die on active duty or subsequently of old age who could fight and die in some future military contingency such as the current campaigns in the Philippines as American Forces support allied nations in the global war on terrorism.

The shortsightedness of legislatures to take on the cause of special interest groups will also, in the future, be lobbied by these same special interests to have special burial sections for our homosexual and lesbian veterans.

The State of Hawaii legislature to approve of this resolution, HCR No. 280, would be to prostitute principles and ethics for some short term appeasement to special interest individuals or groups.



GENE E. CASTAGNETTI

Director

National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific