From: March, Joseph H.
To: Public Relations Division
Subject: Release: Cemetery official to Legion: We will fix Arlington
Date: Monday, March 21, 2011 2:15:46 PM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Cemetery official to Legion: We will fix Arlington

WASHINGTON (March 21, 2011) -- When the United States' most hallowed cemetery was rocked with scandal in 2010, Secretary of the Army John McHugh established a hierarchy to make sure incidents like graves being mismarked and unmarked, burial urns being unearthed and dumped out, and millions of dollars being mismanaged never happens again.

A key player in that hierarchy, Kathryn Condon, pledged to The American Legion today that she'll do everything in her power to restore the public's trust in Arlington National Cemetery.

Condon – executive director of the Army National Cemeteries Program, which oversees long-term planning and day-to-day operations of Arlington – told Legionnaires attending the organization's 51st Washington Conference that a new system is in place to ensure Arlington National Cemetery is a venue fitting to provide eternal rest for our nation's veterans.

"I know the past mismanagement of Arlington has caused great consternation to not only the American public, but to Congress," Condon said. "But most importantly, I know the impact of the mismanagement that's been reported on each and every one of you that's a veteran, and their loved ones. (The past issues) have all shattered the public's trust. But I'm here to tell you that the Secretary of the Army, John McHugh, has stood up and acknowledged the problems at Arlington, and has taken full responsibility for what you're reading about in the papers.

"There is no longer any doubt about who is in charge, because he created the executive director position and (provides) a direct report to him personally. The secretary also named a new superintendent, Pat Hallinan. Together, both of us in the last 10 months have resolved most of the issues. But in that process, we have also uncovered many additional problems at Arlington.

But you have my promise that we'll address them, we'll fix them and we'll move forward."

Condon said a new level of accountability among the Arlington staff is one of the biggest steps in the rebuilding process.

"We are hiring 57 additional employees at Arlington National Cemetery," she said. "We're establishing new policies and procedures and making sure that the employees understand what those standards are. And we're going to hold them accountable to them.

"Folks are being sent to training. And just as an aside, we sent one of our supervisors to a training school that the (Department of Veterans Affairs) sponsors, and he came up to me afterwards and said that was the first training he's received in a 20-plus year career at Arlington National Cemetery."

Condon said the cemetery is purchasing new equipment for more efficient burial operations and a six-step procedure has been implemented to assure correct burials and correctly marked gravesites.

"We are instituting digital mapping," she said. "One day … everything in the cemetery will be electronic. We will no longer rely on paper records. And when we do the digital mapping, we will make sure we track each and every gravesite and niche, so we can tell which graves are occupied, what graves are not occupied, what graves on are on burial schedule for that week, and what graves were in authorized reservation before 1962 … or where a national gravesite in the cemetery is obstructed."

Condon said the most important new implementation is the cemetery's consolidated call center with a toll free number (877-907-8585).

"Families that wanted to schedule a burial service were sometimes kept on hold for over an hour, and then their phone calls were dropped, and they had to start that process all over again," she said. "We now have an integrated center that answers each and every phone call, so we can tell you now how many people call a day to schedule a burial service. Right now the average is 45 calls a day."

Condon said the cemetery also has started handling contracts differently. All are now closely monitored by training government workers, and contractors are watched closely "to make sure those contractors are doing the job they're supposed to do to maintain the pristine grounds of Arlington National Cemetery.

"We have made tremendous progress in remedying the issues that came out of the Army Inspector General report," Condon said. "I want you to know that each and every day Pat Hallinan and I are striving to get Arlington off of the front page of the paper so we can only move forward with the success that we're making."

-30 –

Media contact: Marty Callaghan, mcallaghan@legion.org or 202-263-5758/202-215-8644.