

NEVER THE LESS, THEY PERSISTED

Bob Wyllie, Post 1921

It was 4 March 1865, a time of great uneasiness, as the nation braced itself for the final throes of the Civil War, thousands of spectators gathered near the Capital on a muddy Pennsylvania Avenue, to hear President Lincoln's second inaugural address. In just over one month the war would end, and the President would be assassinated. With deep philosophical insights, critics have considered the speech as one of Lincoln's best.

As the speech progressed, the President turned to the tasks of reconciliation and reconstruction. The final paragraph of the speech was his prescription for the Nation's recovery:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

The words have stood the test of time. *"To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan"* have become the motto of the Department Veterans Affairs, who is responsible for our National Cemetery Program, which ensures veterans have proper internment space and that it is perpetually maintained. The program manages cemeteries throughout the U.S. and many approved sites around the world.

Most certainly you have seen a National Cemetery or pictures of them, perhaps you have a relative interned in one and maybe you have attended a Military Honors presentation at one of them. No matter how closely you are aware of our National Cemeteries, everyone has the same impression of how well they are maintained, how orderly it is and how precise all the features are presented.

Veteran status entitles an individual to be assured of having such a respectful resting place, if he or she chooses to exercise that benefit, after serving in our Armed Forces. All veterans greatly appreciate this recognition and benefit.

This is a factual article regarding an exception to the above conclusion, and how it is being corrected by concerned veterans after a four-year effort by those who wished to "see the right thing done". Their efforts were dedicated to assuring that President Lincoln's promise was upheld, and the effected Veterans were assured such a proper final resting place.

A historical appreciation of events is required to properly appreciate the situation encountered by the taskforce and the site in question. A geographical appreciation is also a necessity. Located in the northeast portion of the San Francisco Bay near the Carquinez Strait, which links the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers flowing into the Bay. The city of Vallejo is just to the north of the Strait. A large Island is across a small channel from the city known as Mare Island. It got its name because a Mexican General's favorite

horse had wandered off in the 1840's and was found on the island.

In 1853, newly appointed Navy Commander David Farragut was dispatched to explore the West Coast to determine a site for the very first Navy base in the West. The purpose was to extend U.S. interests in the Pacific. In 1854, he selected Mare Island to be the first West Coast Naval facility. Its major emphasis was to be ship building. The first Warship was built in 1859 and the first West Coast dry dock was constructed at Mare Island (1872-91). (By the way Commander David Farragut, whose order as an Admiral, *"Dam the torpedoes, full speed ahead!"* has been quoted often.)

Mare Island played a major role in both World Wars. During WW II, the ship building facility turned out scores of ships and submarines. By the end of the war, they had built 17 Submarines, four submarine tenders, 31 Destroyer Escorts, 33 small craft and over 300 landing craft. Of course, ships damaged in battle were also repaired and refitted in the base's dry docks.

Mare Island holds a unique record of completely building the Destroyer *USS Ward (DD-139)* in 17.5 days during WW I. (*Ward* was named in honor of Commander James Harmon Ward, USN, (1806-1861), the first Navy officer to be killed in action during the Civil War.) Under the pressure of urgent World War I needs for destroyers, her construction was pushed rapidly from keel laying on 15 May 1918 to launching on 1 June and commissioning on 24 July 1918.

Both wars greatly expanded the bases buildings and support facilities, including a hospital, Officer housing and a large ammunition depot. When San Francisco experienced the massive earthquake and fire in 1906, Mare Island sent ships and personnel to battle the fire. Other ships from many nations that were in the S.F. Port, also had their crews fighting the fire. Many of the personnel who were injured were brought back to Mare Island for medical care, some foreign sailors, some were children. Many died at the Mare Island Hospital. Some who perished as result of the 1906 fire were interned at this cemetery.

This is where the story begins to focus on the specific cemetery site in question: the Mare Island Naval Cemetery, the oldest Naval Military Cemetery in the West. It was established shortly after the base was created in 1854. The first recorded burial at the site was in 1856. The cemetery is located at the southern end of the island, on a hill which faces the channel that separates the island from the bay coastline. It is a wonderful site. There will be much more about the cemetery, but the historical events must be further explained to understand why it was abandoned.

After WW II, U.S. ship building became more focused at East Coast facilities and Mare Island was scaled back, doing mostly repair and refitting functions. It did play a major role with the Pacific Nuclear submarine fleet providing repair and support to Subs

from this central California site.

The new role of Sub repair and refitting changed the character of the base. Security became very tight, and the base provided very limited access and of course the staff and personnel were fewer and most of the base was off-limits. The scaled down naval population also had an economic impact on the Vallejo area.

Mare Island was a major Naval facility for approximately 150 years. It was closed as an active base in 1990. The base and its assets were no longer required. Six years later the Government, under the BRAC program, mandated that the Mare Island facility be permanently closed. Many military bases and facilities throughout the country were abandoned during the 1990's under the BRAC program. In the San Francisco Bay Area, that meant all Navy and Army bases, with only Travis AFB left.

The Navy deeded the complete Mare Island facility and all its assets to the city of Vallejo, but provided no funds for future support or maintenance of any of the assets. At the time there was a public law that required the military to transfer military cemeteries to the DVA should they become abandoned. The law was somehow ignored by the Navy and the VA during the base realignment and closure process; therefore, no Federal funds were set aside for maintenance and support of the cemetery and title to the cemetery was transferred to the Vallajo.

Meanwhile, with the base closure and the deeding of the property and the loss of revenue from Mare Island operations, Vallejo went bankrupt, leaving the cemetery operation with no financial support. The deterioration of the site continued, and the city did not have the resources to maintain the property.

After financial procedural issues and operation changes, Vallejo began to recover. An effort to try to lease facilities at Mare Island to private sector organizations started to recover the island main assets. They even built a dog walking park at the southern end of the island for citizens and to entice new potential businesspersons and enterprises. However, the cemetery had very limited maintenance support and virtually no budget or resources and limited volunteers.

Now this story focusses on the last four plus years and becomes positive. In March 2017, retired Navy Captain Ralph Parrott, who resides in a Virginia suburb of Washington DC, and his wife Betty, were taking military flights (hops) to the Far East on a planned vacation. Unfortunately, they got stranded at Travis AFB due to the lack of airplane availability and had to wait until the next day to continue their trip. Since they had the time, Captain Parrott suggested they visit Mare Island and inspect the progress Vallejo had accomplished in their rebuilding and leasing of the facility's assets. While visiting the Island they made it to the dirt road leading to the new dog walking park. To get to the park, they had to walk past the entrance to the cemetery. When Capt. Parrott saw the cemetery, and its condition, he was appalled. As stated above, veterans cherish their benefit for a proper resting place. More im-

portantly, veterans "have the backs" of their comrades and will act to protect them from inequities. The dilapidated Cemetery conditions included:

- ◆ A border fence that was partially missing, some gates also missing or unworking
- ◆ No uniformity of grave markers in form or size
- ◆ Tombstones that were leaning, laying on the ground or broken (some resulting from an earthquake across the Bay in Napa, years ago)
- ◆ Tombstones that were unreadable and needed to be restored
- ◆ Graves that were sinking due to drainage system failure or the influence of adjacent large trees
- ◆ Large trees that were encroaching and effecting the condition of grave sites.
- ◆ Huge tree limbs and tree bark covering large areas, including grave sites
- ◆ Cement and brick border walls that were crumbling and missing sections
- ◆ Wrought Iron fences missing pieces/sections
- ◆ Landscaping of adjacent property encroaching into the cemetery
- ◆ A population of rattlesnakes residing in and the around the cemetery

Capt. Parrott, immediately called the Mayor of Vallejo, Bob Sampayan and had a lengthy, and heated conversation which ended with the Captain saying "what are you going to do about it"?

It should be noted that because of the high security of the base prior to the closing, few people even knew the cemetery existed. Those that did, were not generally involved in anything other than their current employment requirements. Additionally, the VA never had any responsibility for the cemetery and probably knew little about it.

After many later discussions with the Mayor, the Captain and he began to develop a plan which initially got the local media involved. Rachel Zrihen of the Vallejo Times-Herald wrote an article that got great attention, especially among the Veteran organizations in California. They also got the initial involvement of retired Army Colonel Nester Aliga, living in the Vallejo area and whose wife was then on the Vallejo City Council. She is now Vice-Mayor.

The plan was simple! Vallejo would give the cemetery land back to the government at no cost, then have the VA assume the cemetery and add it to the National Cemetery system, restore it and perpetually maintain it. The VA did not agree to the plan and a struggle began.

Colonel Aliga created an on-line petition directed at the two million+ veterans in California, all belonging to various Veteran organizations within the State.

Under California law, a Council representing all Veteran organization within the state, is to be composed of a selected group of State Commanders of those organizations. The council shall advise the CA Senate and Assembly of veteran needs and opinions of proposed legislation concerning veterans. Bob Wyllie, of Post 1921, was a member of that Council and had

expressed interest in the Mare Island issue resulting from the Vallejo Times-Herald article. He accepted a volunteer position with Capt. Parrott to focus on Veteran organizations and State Government regarding the Mare Island cemetery issue. Additionally, he, along with Col. Aliga, promoted media interest and the online petition. Within weeks the petition had over 55,000 signatures endorsing the plan for the VA to take over the cemetery. Several TV stations included video news segments about Mare Island's cemetery in their nightly broadcasts.

A total of 952 graves are within the Mare Island cemetery. In preparing for the media's questions a search of records revealed that the Cemetery included the following:

- ◆ 860 Veteran Graves – Navy and Marines
- ◆ 3 Metal of Honor Recipients
- ◆ 8 Russian Sailors
- ◆ 4 French Sailors
- ◆ 40 Spouses, including the daughter of Francis Scott Key (Ana Arnold Key Turner). Her Husband, Daniel was a West Point Graduate and a War of 1812 Veteran and is also buried next to her.
- ◆ 33 Children
- ◆ 7 Other Civilians

California State Senator Bill Dodd introduced a Joint Resolution approved by the State Senate and the Assembly, which endorsed the transfer of ownership of the Mare Island cemetery to the Federal Government and supported its restoration and perpetuity of maintenance.

It should also be noted that in 1975, the cemetery took its place in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Mare Island Naval Ammunition Historic District.

The VA continued its resistance. The reason was never made clear and the task force to this day is unsure why the reluctance continued and was so negative to accepting the Mare Island site. Other public and privately held cemeteries had previously been accepted into the Nation Cemetery System. At the time, the Cemetery System contained 147 cemeteries, and it has had the authority to create military burial sites since the Civil War pursuant to an act passed by the US Congress on 17 July 1862.

The decision was then made to take a more political approach and solicited the support of California Senators Diane Feinstein and Kamala Harris and Congressman Mike Thompson (Mare Island is within his District). Of course, Captain Parrott and Thomas Bandzul, another veteran volunteer residing in Washington DC, because of their location, had been meeting with military and political personnel within any office that could influence the acceptance of the proposal to transfer the cemetery to the Federal government.

Their activities increased as they approached the DC offices of both Senators Feinstein and Harris as well as Congressman Thompson. Meanwhile Bob Wyllie, and to a greater extent, Nester Aliga, frequent-

ly called upon the California offices of both Senators, which became increasingly frustrating. It was difficult to get any attention of their staff personnel and when told the story about the cemetery there was virtually no follow-up. This required additional calls and discussions with different staff. Over months, the Senators eventually became aware of the Mare Island issue.

It was confusing that the Senators did not recognize that our message was important to two million veterans who reside in California, all of whom are voting age. Nor were they concerned that the issue effected a Northern California city and was "close to home".

The exception was Congressman Thompson, a combat veteran and the cemetery is within his Congressional District. He and his staff immediately got involved.. There is no need to detail all the meetings and the time it took to get action. The result was to get "Bills" in the US Senate and House to force the transfer of the cemetery. The problem would then become getting those bills out of committee and the respective floors for a vote. For several reasons, including a government shut down and no floor vote, the bills had to be reintroduced in the following years as well. The timetable for the various bill was as follows:

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| Congressman Thompson | Feinstein/Harris |
| HR 5588 (4/23/18) | S 2881 (5/17/18) |
| HR 578 (1/15/19) | S 127 (1/15/19) |
| HR 6039 (2/28/20) | S 2983 (12/5/19) |

The above bills were never voted upon in either the House or the Senate. They never got out of their respective committees.

Congressman Thompson was instrumental in getting the Mare Island proposition written into the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (HR 6395). (A similar bill to fund the Military must be created each year.) Unfortunately, the bill was vetoed by President Trump because it allowed the name changes of several military bases which were originally established to recognize confederate Generals. The veto was overridden, on 1 January 2021. The law funded the military and directed the VA to accept the Mare Island cemetery, restore it and perpetually maintain it as part of the National Cemetery System.

On Veterans Day, 11 November 2021, the City of Vallejo, with the help of volunteers, hosted a celebration of the "Start of the Transfer of the Mare Island Cemetery to the US Department of Veterans Affairs". The speakers and attendees included:

- ◆ US Representative Mike Thompson, US Congress
- ◆ Mayor Robert McConnell, City of Vallejo
- ◆ Previous Major Bob Sampayan, City of Vallejo
- ◆ Glenn Powers, Deputy Under Secretary National Cemetery Administration,
- ◆ Department of Veteran Affairs
- ◆ Karnig Ohannessian, Deputy Assistant Secretary US Navy (Environment)
- ◆ Major General Miles Davis, US ARMY 63rd Readiness Division
- ◆ Duane Sarmiento, Junior Vice-Commander, VFW

◆ Ralph Parrott, Captain US Navy (retired)

Colonel Nester Aliga, Army (retired) and Bob Wyllie, SAMS Post 1921, were in attendance. Unfortunately, the third major volunteer in the effort, Thomas Bandzul of Washington DC was unable to attend.

While the formal transfer of the cemetery was yet to occur and be finalized, the celebration was wonderful, mostly because of the current status and the culmination of the almost five-year effort of a small group of veterans who wished to assure that those interned at the Mare Island cemetery obtained a final resting place as envisioned by those who value the commitment which dates back to President Lincoln's in speech in 1865.

The second delight of the day was to see the improvements made to the cemetery since Capt. Parrott discovered its condition in 2017. Those improvements were accomplished because of the numerous discussions with the DVA over the years, and the suggestion and assistance of Karin Ohannessian of the Navy, who informed Vallejo about the DoD Innovative Readiness (IRT) program and he assisted the city in applying for the IRT program. The city was accepted into the program and the Mare Island cemetery became a project for the Army Reserve's 801st Engineer Company (construction) based at Mare Island beginning in Aug 2019.

Massive trees were removed, surrounding land was graded, the fence was repaired, burial sites were leveled, tombstones were cleaned, repaired as possible (some will be replaced), crumbling cemetery walls were replaced, or removed. An impressive flagpole and its central site were constructed. Irrigation issues began to be addressed. Despite COVID disruptions, they have nearly completed the extensive project to restore the cemetery back to national shrine conditions.

The DVA will still have a major restoration effort to complete the restoration of the Mare Island cemetery to National Cemetery status. The process has begun and everyone one is eager to complete the transfer and see it accomplished. However, for those of us who were involved in the effort to see the improvements on a sunny Veterans Day afternoon, it was a heartwarming event.

ED NOTE: The cemetery is now under the DVA.

Commission Recommendations for Army Base Name Changes

A commission that studied whether Army bases with Confederate ties should be renamed suggests that nine bases be renamed for Army heroes. Congress created the commission in the 2021 Defense Authorization Act as part of an effort to address systemic racism in the services. The panel will share its final report on the renaming with lawmakers no later than 1 Oct. That report is also expected to include an estimate of the cost of making the changes. The final names were picked from a list of 34,000 suggestions made by the American public, which was whittled down to fewer than 100 finalists. If the recommendations are adopted, some of the bases will make history as the first named

for women and Black Americans. Ty Seidule, vice chair of the naming commission, told reporters that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has the authority to direct base naming.

Fort Bragg, NC would become Fort Liberty, after the founding principles of the nation, and the 82nd Airborne Division's song that goes "We're all -American [and] proud to be, for we are the soldiers of liberty." Leaders of various Army units, including some in the special operations community, didn't want the base to be "named for anyone not from their tribe," and vetoed some of the candidates. Members of the local community pushed for Liberty, which represents a founding value for both the nation and the Army, according to a press release from the commission.

Fort Benning, GA, to become Fort Moore; after Hal Moore, a retired lieutenant general, and Julia Moore. Hal received the Distinguished Service Cross for actions during the Vietnam War; and his wife Julia changed how the services notifies family members of casualties to deliver the news in a more compassionate way.

Fort Gordon, GA, to become Fort Eisenhower after General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who served as supreme commander of the allied expeditionary force in Europe during World War II.

Fort A.P. Hill, VA, to become Fort Walker, after Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, the Army's first female surgeon, who treated soldiers in the Civil War and later received a Medal of Honor

Fort Hood, TX, to become Fort Cavazos, after Gen. Richard Cavazos, who received the Distinguished Service Cross for heroism in the Vietnam War, and became the Army's first Hispanic four-star general.

Fort Lee, VA, to become Fort Gregg-Adams, after Lt. Gen. Arthur Gregg and Lt. Col. Charity Adams. Gregg was a key figure in the integration of black soldiers into the Army. Adams was one of the Army's highest ranking female soldiers, led the first female Black unit of the Army, the Postal Battalion, deployed in Europe, WW II.

Fort Pickett, VA, to become Fort Barfoot, after Tech. Sgt. Van T. Barfoot, a WW II Medal of Honor recipient.

Fort Polk, LA, to become Fort Johnson, after Sgt. William Henry Johnson, a WW I Medal of Honor recipient.

Fort Rucker, AL, to become Fort Novosel after CWO 4 Michael J. Novosel Sr., a Vietnam War Medal of Honor recipient.

