

November 29, 2018

Dear General Wolfenbarger and members,

I am writing to request that you intercede on and encourage the Army to make prospective changes to burial eligibility for Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) so that the generation of military women who were prohibited by law from combat roles remain eligible for in-ground burials. If changes move forward as considered, they will perpetuate the inequities this group of women experienced in their military careers.

My primary source of information on this issue is through the Military Officers Association (MOAA). Hearings were held in the House Armed Services Military Personnel subcommittee to consider ways to address future capacity issues for Arlington National Cemetery. There has been an extensive effort to collect opinions from various stakeholders. And now it appears that a directive included in the FY 2019 National Defense Authorization Act requires the Secretary of the Army make changes to internment eligibility at ANC by the end of September 2019.

There is opinion that "given current burial rates and demand, the only way to retain ANC as an active cemetery far into the future is by cutting off a significant number of the retiree population" and restricting eligibility for burial at ANC to "Medal of Honor recipients, those killed in action, high award recipients, former POW's, Purple Heart recipients, WWII-era veterans, active duty deaths". All other retirees would be limited to above ground burials.

Today, retired men and women have full and equal access to ANC. If revised ANC policy endorses combat-associated criteria or decorations for in-ground burial, this would rip away eligibility from a class of retired women and essentially reinstate exclusions for women which have been statutorily removed by Congress. This approach would severely discriminate against a generation of military women who were barred from combat, not by choice – and for all practical purposes, these women would now be denied access to in-ground burial at ANC.

I hope that you would recommend grandfathered eligibility for in-ground burial, in other words full access to ANC, for women retirees with retirement dates prior to the complete removal of the combat exclusion [3 December 2015*]. This is a finite population which should not unduly stress ANC; however, this is an exception that would bridge the gap between exclusion and full inclusion in the Armed Forces for a generation of servicewomen. Furthermore, the exception would acknowledge the contributions and evolutionary history of women in our military especially for those women whose service accomplishments helped pave the way for equal recognition for the women who came after them.

For much of U.S. history, women's participation in the Armed Forces was severely limited by law. Despite gender integration efforts, it seems the legacy of exclusion for a discrete group of retirees could now persist into future policy. Changing the qualifications for in-ground burial and establishing unattainable restrictions for a specific community reestablishes historical inequality and discrimination. It is a step back in time. Exclusion from in-ground burial on the basis of combat qualifications adds injury to insult and only perpetuates exclusionary policies which Congress has now rectified.

Very respectfully,

Linda Lentz, CAPT USN (Retired)

** There are numerous incremental legislative and policy actions for integration of women in the Armed Services which culminated on 3 December 2015 when Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter ordered the military to open all combat jobs to women with no exceptions. Source: "Women in Combat: Issues for Congress" Congressional Research Service, December 13, 2016*