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News Release

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VA Recognizes Military Sacrifices on Memorial Day

WASHINGTON – From parades to somber ceremonies and a moment of silence, Americans will recall the sacrifices of military members who paid the ultimate price for freedom on Memorial Day, Monday, May 25.

“From May 23 to May 30, commemorative events at VA national cemeteries will present a sacred responsibility for employees and volunteers to honor these greatest of American heroes,” said Steve Muro, VA’s acting under secretary for memorial affairs. “Since the birth of Memorial Day in 1866, national cemeteries have been the most visible expression of our country’s gratitude for their service.”

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will continue its annual tradition of hosting services at most of its national cemeteries and many other facilities nationwide. The programs, which are the focus of Memorial Day events in many communities, honor the service of deceased Veterans and people who die on active duty.

For the dates and times of Memorial Day programs at VA national cemeteries, visit www.cem.va.gov.

More than 100,000 people are expected to attend activities at VA's national cemeteries, with color guards, readings, bands and choir performances. The events will honor about one million men and women who died in wartime periods, including about 655,000 battle deaths.

Some national cemetery observances are unique. At VA’s most active cemetery, in Riverside, Calif., volunteers have been reading aloud -- since Armed Forces Day, May 17 -- the names of more than 150,000 Veterans buried there, and are expected to continue at least until the Memorial Day program. In one-hour shifts around the clock, 500 volunteers – two to four at a time -- alternate reading the names.

The Dayton, Ohio, National Cemetery will host members of Veterans organizations on the weekend before Memorial Day who will display 400 donated burial flags along the main road. The cemetery also expects 2,000 children and youths, many from Scout troops, to decorate more than 40,000 graves on the weekend in two hours.

VA's 128 national cemeteries include 13 that opened in the last 10 years. Another 3 cemeteries are under development. VA currently maintains 18,000 acres where 2.9 million gravesites are located. By 2010, Veterans' burial space is expected to be available to 90 percent of Veterans within 75 miles of where they live.

Information about Memorial Day, including its history, can be found at www.va.gov/opa/speceven/memday/.

VA is a cosponsor with the White House Commission on Remembrance of an annual Moment of Remembrance at 3 p.m., Eastern time, nationwide on Memorial Day, a time to pause and reflect on the sacrifice of America's fallen warriors and the freedoms that unite Americans. Many institutions will announce a pause in their activities -- from sporting events to public facilities -- to call the nation together in a common bond of silence.

Memorial Day was originally called Decoration Day when the tradition of decorating Civil War graves began. It still brings loved ones to the graves of the deceased, often with flowers as grave decorations. Decorations honoring Veterans buried in national cemeteries are American flags -- either individual small ones on each grave, usually placed by volunteers, or "avenues of flags" flanking both sides of the cemetery main entrance road. Often these flags are the burial flags donated by next of kin of Veterans buried in the cemetery.