



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington, D.C. 20420

CELEBRATING AMERICA'S FREEDOMS

The National Cemetery Administration

National cemeteries in the United States for military veterans and service members began during the Civil War, near the battlefields, military hospitals and campgrounds of the war. On July 17, 1862, President Lincoln signed legislation authorizing the federal government to purchase ground for use as national cemeteries “for soldiers who shall have died in the service of the country.” Up to then, the dead were hastily buried in fields, churchyards, or close to hospitals or prison camps where they died.

After the war, Army crews searched the countryside to find and rebury the Union dead in the original 14 national cemeteries. The remains of Confederate prisoners of war were included, although it was not until 1906 that legislation approved marking their graves with headstones. The re-interment process took five years and resulted in establishing 50 more cemeteries to hold a quarter-million remains. They were reburied with honor. The new cemeteries were enclosed by brick walls and entered through ornate gates. However, the identities of nearly half of the Union dead who are buried in national cemeteries are unknown. A few of the national cemeteries developed around Union prisoner of war camps, where a large numbers of Confederate soldiers died.

Eight years after the war ended, Congress opened national cemeteries to all honorably discharged veterans of the Union forces. Legislation after World War I opened them to American veterans of all wartime service. Finally, after World War II, Congress expanded eligibility for burial to all veterans of U.S. armed forces, American war veterans of allied armed forces and veterans’ spouses and dependent children.

From their founding until 1973, national cemeteries were operated by the Department of the Army. Today, the National Cemetery Administration is part of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VA operates national cemeteries throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. The Department of the Interior and the Department of the Army also administer several national cemeteries, including Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, D.C.

Veterans of every conflict in which the U.S. participated — from the Revolutionary War to the Gulf — are buried in VA’s national cemeteries. In addition to providing a gravesite, VA provides a headstone or marker, and perpetually cares for the grave at no cost to the veteran’s family or heirs.

HISTORICAL FIGURES BURIED IN VA NATIONAL CEMETERIES

President Zachary Taylor, at the cemetery named for him near Louisville, Ky.

The Union's "Andrews' Raiders" who seized a Confederate train and were later caught by Confederates and executed, at Chattanooga, Tenn., National Cemetery.

Florena Budwin, wife of a Pennsylvania soldier of the Civil War, who disguised herself as a man and enlisted in the Union Army. She was captured and imprisoned at Florence, S.C., where her identity was revealed. She remained at the prison to care for Union soldiers, finally dying of illness in 1865. Buried at Florence, South Carolina National Cemetery.

Admiral Chester Nimitz, commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet in World War II, at Golden Gate National Cemetery, San Bruno, Calif.

Ernie Pyle, veteran of World War I, famed World War II correspondent, at National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, Honolulu, along with all 848 unknowns from the Korean War (except one at Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery).