

Arlington National Cemetery Update -- Around 3,471 Open Requests for Burials Backlogged

The last of World War II's Doolittle Raiders —Dayton native Lt. Col. Richard Cole — died 9 April 2019, but more than four months later he still hasn't been laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. A Dayton Daily News investigation found it's not uncommon for veterans and service members to wait nearly a year to be buried in what is considered the nation's most highly regarded cemetery while there is virtually no delay at Dayton National Cemetery. The 5 newspaper also found both national cemeteries are working to head off space shortages, which if not addressed could cause each to fill up within the next few decades. Burials at Arlington can take anywhere from five to 49 weeks once a family submits a request, according to a report issued in May by the Department of Defense's Office of the Inspector General. At Dayton National Cemetery, a burial can take place within days of a request being filed, the director told this news organization.

During World War II, Cole was then-Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle's co-pilot in the lead bomber in a historic 1942 raid to strike Japan. Also known as the "Tokyo Raid," it was the United States' first counter-attack against Japan, happening just four months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Air Force is handling the burial arrangements for Cole, who was cremated, said Tom Casey, a longtime friend of Cole and president of the Doolittle Tokyo Raiders Association. No burial is scheduled yet. "I've been through a few of these, but I've never hit so many stone walls before," Casey said. "Some were immediate burials. We've got a lot of people tied up in this." Arlington has increased the number of cemetery representatives it has on staff to "get veterans and their families here a little bit sooner," said Norka Rojas, director of interment services at Arlington. Since then, wait times have been reduced to around 9 months at the longest.

The root cause for delays at Arlington is that it simply doesn't have the resources available on a daily basis to conduct burials, the report states. Arlington conducts burials based on when a family submits a request, the state of a person's remains and the level of military honors required for a funeral, Rojas said. The cemetery typically has around 30 burials a day, Rojas said. Just eight or so of those daily burials are for vets like Cole who receive high-level honors. "It will require more resources from the branch of service," Rojas said, referring to the Air Force. "It's why we have not been able to schedule his service." There were more than 21 million living vets and dependents eligible to be buried in Arlington as of last year, according to the OIG report. As of September, there were around 3,471 open requests for burial at Arlington.

Aside from Arlington, which is run by the Army, most other national cemeteries are run by the National Cemetery Administration. The NCA has a scheduling office in St. Louis, Missouri. Ohio is home to five national cemeteries and one state veterans cemetery in Sandusky, Ohio. The national cemeteries include two that are still accepting burials, two confederate cemeteries that are filled and a soldier's lot in Cleveland that is also closed. Dayton National Cemetery and Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery in Seville, Ohio are both still accepting burials. While it can take nearly a year to be buried at Arlington, the wait to schedule a burial at Dayton National Cemetery is far shorter, said Doug Ledbetter, director of Dayton's cemetery which shares a campus with the Dayton Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

"Given the volume that they do, I'm not totally surprised," Ledbetter said of Arlington. "That is not the case with us. We can generally be pretty accommodating." Dayton National Cemetery is on track to be full in the next 21-30 years, Ledbetter said. But, the cemetery is already considering its options for expansion. "They'll start looking prior to that obviously because we

don't want to close," Ledbetter said. "It's important for our vets to have access to that benefit." Dayton National Cemetery is preparing to expand its gravesites for cremation and in the next two to three years it will likely add additional casket grave sites, Ledbetter said.

Arlington National Cemetery is nearly full and it's mostly landlocked by a highway. That's an issue the NCA has had to confront when expanding or adding new national cemeteries, Ledbetter said. More than 375,000 people are buried at Arlington, according to the OIG. There are around 99,000 spaces currently available, a spokeswoman said. The Army is considering several expansion options and has also looked into making the cemetery more selective. One expansion currently under consideration could extend the life of Arlington by 15 to 20 years into the mid-to-late 2050s, spokeswoman Kerry Meeker said. Arlington National Cemetery surveyed around 230,000 people last year and the results showed that 96 percent wanted Arlington to remain an active cemetery. "It is our job to care for our nation's heroes and their families and there aren't much more sacred duties than what we do here," Rojas said. "That's the reason we want to continue."

Service members who die in the line of duty and veterans who are not dishonorably discharged can be buried in one of the country's 136 national cemeteries or 33 soldier's lots at no charge to the family. The number of burials have slowly increased at the Dayton cemetery recently. It's a sign, Ledbetter said, that national cemeteries appear to have gained favor in recent years. In 2016, Dayton National Cemetery had around 1,136 burials. This year, the cemetery estimates it will have more than 1,200 burials. "I think there was a stigma years ago because it was something that was free," Ledbetter said. "But, it isn't free. Veterans earn that for their service." Greater awareness of the burial benefit given to vets may also be increasing interest in national cemeteries, said both Ledbetter and Mark Landers, executive director of the Montgomery County Veterans Service Organization.

Families can apply for burial before their relative has passed with forms available through the VA and the Department of Defense but most aren't aware of them, said Landers, whose organization helps vets navigate the benefits system. "I don't think (vets) have known the details of what they can provide out there to be honest with you," Landers said. Dayton National Cemetery is usually able to provide military honors, present a U.S. flag to the family and provide perpetual upkeep and care of the gravesite after the burial, among other things. Taking that burden off of the family of the deceased is a big help, Landers said.

When Cole is eventually interred at Arlington, he will join several other notable Ohioans. John Glenn, who was the first astronaut to orbit earth, a World War II marine and former senator is buried in Arlington. Ohio Medal of Honor recipients Army Sgt. Forrest Everhart and Navy Machinist Mate 1st Class Robert R Scott, whom both served in World War II, are also buried there. It's important, Landers said, that there remain places where veterans who put their life on the line for their country can be buried together. Regardless of what the solution may look like for national cemetery expansions, Landers said the government should continue providing the free burial benefit. "They should maintain and keep offering it," Landers said. "Veterans should have a place to be buried among their comrades."