

A TESTIMONY regarding SB 2265 to the NORTH DAKOTA LEGISLATURE

Joseph Wallevand, Christine, ND

Good morning. I am Joe Wallevand, Christine, North Dakota. As an original member, I have been with the Fargo Memorial Honor Guard since its inception in the Spring of 2019. I want to thank the North Dakota House of Representatives for its consideration of our testimony and would like to offer a few words **IN FAVOR OF SENATE BILL 2265**. Thank you, too, North Dakota Senate and the Veterans Affairs committees of the Legislature for your pass, and to Senator Meyer and his group for sponsoring this bill.

I have been retired for ten years from a 25-year employment as an analytical chemist with the American Crystal Sugar Research Center, preceded by 19 years of full-service high school science teaching. I entered the United States Army from Minnesota in 1965, with nearly three years in the Green Berets including a year as a Special Forces A-team medic in the Mekong Delta of Viet Nam. Following active duty, I served

18 years in the North Dakota Army National Guard, attaining the rank of First Sergeant, retiring after 21 years of military service. My Veterans memberships include the VFW, American Legion, AMVETS, Vietnam Veterans of America, and the Special Forces Association.

Fargo National Cemetery is our “Arlington.” We are extremely proud and honored to be able to volunteer time to serve the needs of our fellow Veterans. Like others in the Honor Guard, I drive a substantial distance to attend burials. Because of my age and the requirements as a caregiver for my wife of over 54 years—plus the unpredictable nature of our North Dakota weather and resulting road conditions—I usually participate only on Fridays. Like my fellow Guard members, I have stood in driving rain, endured near blizzard conditions, coped with bitter cold, maintained Attention and Present Arms while basking in the extreme heat of a summer day, and almost blown over by 60 mph wind gusts during those ceremonies—no joke. Regardless, we come there knowing we have a sacred reason for doing it.

The need for an organization such as ours arose when it was announced the State of North Dakota was getting its own National Cemetery. To correctly administer the honors required for burial in a National Cemetery, an honor guard with rifles and bugle are promised and must be available during the multiple times interments are requested by families and the VA. Members from the various Patriotic Bodies within our two-county area volunteered to perform these duties. The time we needed to get up and running was short: only four months. We needed uniforms; initially, we even had to borrow weapons from established local honor guards. As former military, we rose to the challenge. Despite representing diverse veterans' organizations and previous military services, our common purpose binds us in ways familiar to all who have performed that service. We are a team.

Our numbers are small. Many of our group are out there as often as five days a week often attending more than one burial a day, burials which may be separated by more than two hours. Younger members and some older ones have day jobs which

do not allow them to be available for duty. Some have disabilities which (understandably) make this form of volunteering more difficult. The ones coming from the retired group, like me, have the aggravations of age to contend with. If this were Arlington National Cemetery, full-time active-duty military personnel perform these duties. Even Ft. Snelling in Minnesota can muster enough personnel to do seven committals a day—we can do, and have done, five ceremonies in one day. The acknowledgments we receive from the next of kin and others are deeply appreciated by the Honor Guard.

From our standpoint as volunteers, the building we propose will reduce many of the obstacles we experience doing this important work: storage of our ceremonial weapons, warm rest rooms, parking spots, and other areas which can facilitate our work out there. Additionally, it is our hope this project can be a recruitment tool to attract needed, additional members for the Fargo Memorial Honor Guard.

Though we have our own issues with the current status, we are MORE concerned for the families and friends of the deceased.

The truth is, having served as we did years earlier, WE got used to working under conditions such as these. We do so again willingly, but it is unacceptable THEY should have to endure them. The Fargo Memorial Honor Guard believes the interred veterans and their families deserve to have a memorial service conducted that shows our ultimate respect for them.

What we are proposing can eliminate many of the current difficulties. A single, on-again-off-again restroom which resembles those seen in national park campgrounds (currently having to be substituted for by a Porta-Potty) does not fulfill the needs of potentially large groups of people, commonly older ones, who have been standing out in the cold. The parking can be dreadful for any more than twenty cars in the funeral party. Often, in the cases of well-known decedents or of an unclaimed veteran, the number of attendees at a ceremony can reach close to 200—the parking extending out onto a busy county road and creating a terrible safety problem. Currently, there is no on-site gathering space for the next of kin, prior to nor after the ceremony. Likewise, the Veterans Administration

personnel supervising the affairs of the cemetery must drive to the site from their Fargo VA office.

On a personal note, thirty US Army Special Forces Soldiers have earned the Medal of Honor. It is the Honor Guard's desire to name this building for a Fargo-Moorhead native, 1LT Loren Douglas Hagen, a posthumous recipient from the Viet Nam War. Hagen himself was a Green Beret, which might explain some of my personal zeal, even emotion, in seeing this project through to completion.

With that, I would ask the **House Appropriation Committee to move in favor of SB 2265** to provide the additional funding required to complete this much needed project. I realize many of our past and current State Legislators have had the honor of serving our State and Country, and who can understand the importance of a project such as we are proposing. Our state and region, and especially our veterans and their families need this now. Thank you.