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Dear Veteran,

My name is Jimmy Nelson and I wish to commend you. Your simple decision to request this information could one day become very meaningful to your family and potentially save them several thousands of dollars.

By way of introduction I am a peacetime veteran of the U.S. Navy who previously served as Vice President and General Manager for my family's five-generation funeral home business, Marion Nelson Funeral Home. Our business was established in 1951 by my great-grandfather, Jack Stephenson, and my grandfather, Marion Nelson, who served in the U.S. Marine Corps during WWII. Although he passed away in 1991, the Purple Heart my grandfather received for wounds suffered during the Battle of Guadal Canal still hangs on a wall in the funeral home's arrangement office.

With two facilities in Lake Wales and Frostproof, FL, the funeral homes are in convenient proximity to **Florida National Cemetery and Sarasota National Cemetery**. Over the last several years the number of veterans who are unaware of these beautiful facilities and the invaluable benefits they provide has increasingly disturbed me. I find it extremely unfortunate that so many veterans do not know such an important benefit is available to them, their spouses and, in some instances, their dependent children.

For this reason I have compiled the enclosed information from several resources and purposed to make it available to as many veterans as possible. I believe that whether or not a veteran chooses to utilize this benefit, he or she deserves to know such an entitlement is available. It is my desire that you find it to be of help and significant value.

I am also offering additional help and information pertaining to a related area of consideration. More and more people are realizing the importance of advanced burial or cremation planning. Take it from one who knows first hand – there is nothing more caring that you can do for your family. I strongly urge you to consider relieving them of what could one day be a very emotional burden if you do not take care of it for them ahead of time.

As with many other decisions you face, this type of advanced planning can seem confusing and perhaps overwhelming. It is important to educate yourself as to what options are available before determining which are best for you and your family. With my knowledge of the funeral industry and this veteran benefit I offer my services as an advocate in this regard.

I count it a privilege to have the opportunity to serve those who have served and given so much of themselves for their families and their country.

Sincerely,

*Jimmy Nelson*

James M. "Jimmy" Nelson

US Navy Veteran, GMM2

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## **VETERAN INTERMENT BENEFITS**

Burial in a National Cemetery is an honor reserved for U.S. Armed Forces veterans discharged under *other than dishonorable conditions*. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) maintains this tradition for veterans, veteran spouses and eligible dependent children. This honor is also available to WWII Era Merchant Mariners.

Burial benefits available from the VA National Cemetery Administration include a **gravesite** in any of the 131 National Cemeteries or 90 State Sponsored Veteran Cemeteries\*\* *with available space, opening and closing of the grave, a grave liner, a government headstone or marker and perpetual care*. These benefits are provided at **no cost** to the veteran and his/her spouse and eligible dependent children. When a veteran passes away, his/her family is also eligible to receive a **Burial Flag** and a **Presidential Memorial Certificate**. Cremated remains are buried or inurned in national cemeteries in the same manner and with the same honors as casketed remains.

**Potential Cost Savings** - Because the VA provides these benefits in National Veterans Cemeteries at no cost, a veteran can save the money that would normally be necessary to pay for these services at a private or municipal cemetery. The following example of typical private or municipal cemetery charges for traditional, casket burial illustrates that the potential financial savings is very significant.

• <i>Individual Grave Space</i>	\$1000
• <i>Individual Opening &amp; Closing</i>	\$ 750
• <i>Individual Grave Liner</i>	\$1000
• <i>Individual Headstone or Marker</i>	\$ 750
<b>Total \$3500 per person</b>	

By utilizing a VA Cemetery, a veteran and spouse can potentially save, on average, between \$6000 and \$7000 in cemetery costs for traditional, casket burial.

When cremation is preferred, the cemetery cost savings potential for veteran and spouse can typically reach \$2000 to \$3000.

**Note:** It is important to realize that these benefits apply fully only when a National or State Sponsored VA Cemetery is utilized. If a veteran prefers interment or inurnment in a private or municipal cemetery, he/she is entitled to a **grave marker, burial flag and Presidential Memorial Certificate**. The VA provides some reimbursement for private or municipal cemetery expenses on a limited basis for those veterans who meet certain qualification requirements. Also, if a matching VA style marker is desired for a veteran's non-veteran spouse in a private or municipal cemetery, it must be purchased – typically from a private monument company.

\*\* State Sponsored Veteran Cemeteries are veteran cemeteries that are established and operated by state governments utilizing federal government funding. The VA's State Cemetery Grant Program assists states in providing gravesites for veterans in areas where VA National Cemeteries cannot fully satisfy their burial needs.

## Persons Eligible for Burial in a VA National or State Sponsored Cemetery

- **Veterans and Members of the Armed Forces** (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard)
  - A. Any member of the Armed Forces of the United States who dies on active duty.
  - B. Any veteran who was discharged under conditions other than dishonorable. With certain exceptions, service beginning after September 7, 1980, as an enlisted person, and service after October 16, 1981, as an officer, must be for a minimum of 24 continuous months or the full period for which the person was called to active duty. Undesirable, Bad Conduct and any other type of discharge other than Honorable may or may not qualify the individual for Veterans benefits, depending upon a determination made by a VA Regional Office. Cases presenting multiple discharges of varying character are also referred for adjudication to a VA Regional Office.
  - C. Any citizen of the United States who, during any war in which the United States has been or may hereafter be engaged, served in the Armed Forces of any Government allied with the United States during that war, whose last active service was terminated honorably by death or otherwise, and who was a citizen of the United States at the time of entry into such service and at the time of death.
  
- **Spouses and Dependents**
  - A. The spouse or unremarried surviving spouse of an eligible person, even if that person is not buried or memorialized in a National Cemetery, is eligible for interment in a National Cemetery. In addition, the spouse of a member of the Armed Forces of the United States lost or buried at sea or officially determined to be permanently absent in a status of missing or missing in action or whose remains have been donated to science or cremated and the ashes scattered.
  - B. The surviving spouse of an eligible decedent who remarries an ineligible individual and whose remarriage is void, terminated by the ineligible individual's death, or dissolved by annulment or divorce is eligible for burial in a national cemetery. The surviving spouse of an eligible decedent who remarries an eligible person retains his or her eligibility for burial in a national cemetery.
  - C. The minor children of an eligible person. For purposes of burial in a National Cemetery, a minor child is a person who is unmarried and under the age of 21, or under the age of 23 and pursuing a full-time course of instruction at an approved educational institution.
  - D. An unmarried adult child of an eligible person if the child became permanently incapable of self-support before the attained age of 21 years because of a physical or mental disability.

**Persons Eligible for Burial in a VA National or State Sponsored Cemetery**  
(continued)

- **World War II Merchant Mariners**
  - A. United States Merchant Mariners with oceangoing service during the period of armed conflict, December 7, 1941, to December 31, 1946. A DD-214 documenting this service may be obtained by submitting an application to Commandant (G-MVP-6), United States Coast Guard, 2100 2<sup>nd</sup> St., SW, Washington, DC 20593.
  - B. United States Merchant Marines who served on blockships in support of Operation Mulberry during World War II.
  
- **Members of Reserve Components and Reserve Officers' Training Corps**
  - A. Reservists and National Guard members with 20 years qualifying service, who are entitled to retired pay or would be entitled, if at least 60 years of age, under Chapter 67, title 10, United States Code. Specific categories of individuals eligible for retired pay are delineated in section 1332 of Chapter 67, title 10, United States Code.
  - B. Members of reserve components who die under honorable conditions while hospitalized or undergoing treatment at the expense of the United States for injury or disease contracted or incurred under honorable conditions while performing active duty for training or inactive duty training, or undergoing such hospitalization or treatment.
  - C. Members of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps of the Army, Navy or Air Force who die under honorable conditions while attending an authorized training camp or on an authorized cruise, while performing authorized travel to or from that camp or cruise, or while hospitalized or undergoing treatment at the expense of the United States for injury or disease contracted or incurred under honorable conditions while engaged in one of those activities.
  - D. Members of reserve components who, during a period of active duty for training, were disabled or died from a disease or injury incurred or aggravated in line of duty or, during a period of inactive duty training, were disabled or died from an injury incurred or aggravated in line of duty

**Persons Eligible for Burial in a VA National or State Sponsored Cemetery**  
(continued)

- **Commissioned Officers, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**
  - A. A Commissioned Officer of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (formerly titled the Coast and Geodetic Survey and the Environmental Science Services Administration) with full-time duty on or after July 29, 1945.
  - B. A Commissioned Officer who served before July 29, 1945 and:
    - 1.) Was assigned to an area of immediate hazard described in the Act of December 3, 1942 (56 Stat. 1038; 33 U.S.C. 855a), as amended;
    - 2.) Served in the Philippine Islands on December 7, 1941; or
    - 3.) Transferred to the Department of the Army or the Department of the Navy under the provisions of the Act of May 22, 1917 (40 Stat. 87; 33 U.S.C. 855).
  
- **Public Health Service**
  - A. A Commissioned Officer of the Regular or Reserve Corps of the Public Health Service who served on full-time duty on or after July 29, 1945. If the service of the particular Public Health Service Officer Falls within the meaning of active duty for training, as defined in section 101 (22), title 38, United States Code, he or she must have been disabled or died from a disease or injury incurred or aggravated in the line of duty
  - B. A Commissioned Officer of the Regular or Reserve Corps of the Public Health Service who performed full-time duty prior to July 29, 1945:
    - 1.) In time of war;
    - 2.) On detail for duty with the Army, Navy Air Force, Marine Corps or Coast Guard; or
    - 3.) While the Service was part of the military forces of the United States pursuant to Executive Order of the President.
  - C. A Commissioned Officer serving on inactive duty training as defined in section 101 (23), title 38, United States Code, whose death resulted from an injury incurred or aggravated in the line of duty.

### **Military Honors**

The VA and the National Cemetery Administration do ***not*** provide military honors. These special honors may be provided by local military personnel, veteran organizations or private volunteer groups who provide military honors upon request.

If military honors are desired they must be arranged, prior to the committal service, by the family or their funeral director by calling the nearest military installation or Veteran Service Organization to see if military honors can be provided.

National cemetery staffs can provide telephone numbers and locations of organizations that may be able to provide military honors near their cemetery. In the absence of military honors, the cemetery staff may be able to play a recorded version of taps during a committal service if arrangements are made in advance.

Full military honors consist of uniformed body bearers, a flag-folding detail, rifle salute, a bugler and a chaplain. They may be modified to be consistent with the number of people available to provide honors.

### **Presidential Memorial Certificates**

A Presidential Memorial Certificate (PMC) is an engraved paper certificate, signed by the current President of the United States, to honor the memory of honorably discharged deceased veterans. This program was initiated in March 1962 by President John F. Kennedy and has been continued by all subsequent Presidents.

The VA administers the PMC program by preparing the certificates, which bear the President's signature expressing the country's grateful recognition of the veteran's service in the United States Armed Forces. Eligible recipients include the deceased veteran's next of kin and loved ones, and more than one certificate may be provided.

Eligible recipients, or someone acting on their behalf, may apply for a PMC in person at any VA regional office, by U.S. mail, or by toll-free fax. Requests cannot be sent via email. You must complete VA Form 40-0247. Please be sure to include a return mailing address and phone number along with a copy of the veteran's discharge documents and death certificate.

Written requests for PMCs should be sent to Presidential Memorial Certificates (41B3), National Cemetery Administration, 5109 Russell Road, Quantico, VA 22134-3903.

### **Burial Flags**

When burial is in a National, State or Post Cemetery a burial flag will be provided. When burial is in a private or municipal cemetery, a burial flag may be obtained from a VA regional office, a National Cemetery and most U.S. Post Offices by completing VA form 27-2008, ***Application for United States Flag for Burial Purposes***, and submitting it with a copy of the veteran's discharge papers at any of these locations.

Only one burial flag may be provided per veteran and most veterans are eligible for a burial flag. Reservists entitled to retired pay are also eligible to receive a burial flag.

### **Headstone or Marker**

Any deceased veteran eligible for burial in a National Cemetery is also eligible for a Government-provided headstone or marker. Headstones and markers are provided for eligible spouses and dependents of veterans only when buried in a National, Military Post/Base or State Sponsored Veterans Cemetery. Spouses and dependents buried in a private cemetery are not eligible for a Government-provided headstone or marker.

Persons with 20-years of service in the National Guard or Reserves who are entitled to retired pay subsequent to October 27, 1992, are also eligible for a Government-provided headstone or marker. A copy of the Reserve Retirement Eligibility Benefits Letter must accompany the application. Active duty service while in the National Guard or Reserves also establishes eligibility.

Flat bronze, flat granite, flat marble, upright granite and upright marble types are available to mark the grave in a style consistent with the cemetery. Headstones and markers are inscribed with the name of the deceased, branch of service and the years of birth and death. Optional items that may be inscribed are military grade, rank or rate, war service such as "World War II", months and days of birth and death, an emblem reflecting one's religion and text indicating valor awards.

When burial is in a National, State Sponsored Veteran or Military Post Cemetery, the headstone or marker is ordered through the cemetery, which will have the headstone placed on the grave. Some State Sponsored Veteran Cemeteries may charge the applicant a nominal fee for setting a government-provided headstone or marker.

When burial occurs in a cemetery other than a National, State Sponsored Veteran or Military Post Cemetery, the headstone or marker must be applied for from the VA and will be shipped at government expense. The VA, however, does not pay for the cost of placing the headstone or marker.

### **Headstones or Markers for Memorial Plots**

To memorialize an eligible veteran whose remains are not available for burial, the VA will provide a memorial headstone or marker. They are the same as those used to identify a grave except that the phrase "In Memory of" precedes the inscription. The headstone or marker is available to memorialize eligible veterans or deceased service-members, whose remains were not recovered or identified, buried at sea, donated to science or cremated and scattered. The memorial marker also may be provided for placement in a cemetery other than a National Cemetery. In such cases, the VA supplies the marker and pays the cost of shipping but does not pay for the plot or the placement of the marker.

### **Reimbursement of Burial Expenses**

The VA will pay a burial allowance up to \$2000 if the veteran's death is service-connected. In some instances, the VA will also pay the cost of transporting the remains of a service-disabled veteran to the National Cemetery nearest the home of the deceased that has available gravesites. In such cases, the person who bore the veteran's burial expenses may claim reimbursement from the VA.

The VA will pay up to \$700 toward burial and funeral expenses for veterans who, at the time of death, were entitled to receive pension or compensation or would have been entitled to compensation but for receipt of military retirement pay. Eligibility also may be established when death occurs in a VA facility, a nursing home under VA contract or a State nursing home. Additional costs of transportation of the remains may be paid. There is no time limit for filing reimbursement claims of service-connected deaths. In other deaths, claims must be filed within two years after permanent burial or cremation.

The VA will pay up to \$700 for a plot allowance when a veteran is not buried in a cemetery that is under U.S. Government jurisdiction under the following circumstances:

- The veteran was discharged from active duty because of disability incurred or aggravated in the line of duty;
- The veteran was in receipt of compensation or pension or would have been except for receiving military retired pay;
- The veteran died in a VA facility.

The plot allowance may be paid to the State if a veteran is buried without charge for the cost of a plot or interment in a State owned cemetery reserved solely for veteran burials. Burial expenses paid by the deceased's employer or a State agency will not be reimbursed. For information on monetary benefits, call 1-800-827-1000.

### Burial at Sea

Burial at sea is available to veterans and their families, and other eligible persons, as previously indicated. However, this is not a function of the VA National Cemetery Administration. Burials at sea are administered and carried out as a function of the U.S. Department of the Navy.

An eligible individual who desires burial at sea should indicate so in writing (i.e. last will and testament). At the time of need the individual's estate executor or funeral director should contact:

Military Medical Support Office (MMSO)  
Mortuary Affairs, Bldg. 38H  
Great Lakes, IL 60085-5200  
866-787-0081

This office may also be contacted for information prior to the time of need.

### Arlington National Cemetery

Arlington National Cemetery is under the jurisdiction of the Army and, due to limited grave space availability, eligibility for burials is more limited than at other national cemeteries. For information on Arlington burials write to Superintendent, Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, VA 22211 or call 877-907-8585.

### General Points of Interest

- Funeral services are not held at National Cemeteries but a final committal service may be performed at the cemetery. For safety reasons these services are held in committal shelters located away from the gravesites. Cemetery personnel will handle the actual interment following the committal service. Immediate family members may be allowed to view the burial only if arrangements have been made in advance with the cemetery director.
- National Cemeteries do not usually conduct burials on weekends or federal holidays. A weekend caller will be directed to one of the three offices that remain open to schedule burials for the upcoming week.
- Floral arrangements may accompany the casket or urn and will be placed on the grave after burial. Floral items will be removed from the grave as soon as they become faded, wilted or unsightly.
- National Cemeteries utilize a grave-liner to encase the casket for the purpose of preventing or minimizing settlement of the grave. The grave-liner is a concrete box with a lid; it is **NOT A SEALED VAULT**. If the family desires to provide a vault for casket burial they may do so at their expense.

## *O.K., now that you know, how do you arrange to utilize a VA National Cemetery?*

To this point I have provided you a great deal of information and likely with enough detail for you to determine whether or not you wish to further consider utilizing your VA interment benefits. Hopefully you are now fully aware and much more knowledgeable of entitlements you gave so much to deserve. Additional help and answers are available by calling a Veteran's Benefits Counselor at 1-800-827-1000, or a Veterans Service Officer in your area.

If you decide that you wish to take advantage of these benefits, it then becomes a matter of determining which veterans cemetery you wish to utilize, and letting your family know about it. By doing this you will potentially accomplish two things: save a significant amount of money, and, more importantly, relieve your loved ones of a difficult and stressful decision making process at the time of need.

Although burial in a national cemetery cannot be reserved in advance, there is much to be done when the time of need occurs. For most families, the best time for gathering the necessary information and documentation needed to make this decision is certainly *before* the inevitable occurs.

This is where your Funeral Director comes in. It will ultimately be his/her responsibility to contact the National Cemetery to set the burial or cremation interment arrangements, and when he/she does he/she will be asked for the following information:

- ✓ Veteran's full name
- ✓ Veteran's full name and military rank
- ✓ Branch of service
- ✓ Social security number
- ✓ Service number
- ✓ VA claim number, if applicable
- ✓ Date and place of birth
- ✓ Date and place of death
- ✓ Date of retirement or last separation from active duty
- ✓ Copy of any military separation documents, i.e. military discharge or form DD-214

He/She will also assist with submitting the appropriate requisition forms for the burial flag, headstone and any burial expense reimbursements to which you may be entitled.

The VA recommends that any eligible person desiring interment in a veterans cemetery should assemble the above listed information, prepare a statement of wishes and make it all readily available to those ultimately responsible for handling the funeral arrangements. Your funeral director is uniquely capable of assisting you in this way before the time of need arrives.

## ***I know of no downside to advanced planning and establishing prearrangements.***

The hardest part is thinking about it and actually doing it. If, however, you can get past the uneasiness long enough to get through it, you will likely find a very gratifying sense of relief from knowing that it is taken care of. Beyond that, I cannot adequately describe to you what it could one day mean to your loved ones. This type of advanced planning most often prevents or mitigates an additional source of stress and provides your family with an expression of your love that is like no other. I truly wish I could somehow convey it to you.

One family has to deal with disposition and business decisions on top of dealing with the deep emotions associated with losing a loved one; their level of grief is exponentially increased. The myriad of necessary decisions become a source of additional stress and pressure. The time for sound, reflective reasoning now past, they typically rely on strained emotions for direction. Under these circumstances they worry more about what is good enough and commonly make more costly decisions than they would have otherwise made.

Another family's decisions are limited essentially to dates and times. They experience the relief that comes from knowing that their loved one has already taken care of the hard part for them. Decisions have been made when there was plenty of time to think them over, and as a result less money has likely been spent. Without the additional stress of an uncomfortable decision-making process, they are able to focus their attention on their emotions and their loss. In this scenario, decisions are not dictated by circumstances and undue stress.

Most funeral homes are available to assist with establishing prearrangements. Most any funeral director should be well qualified to help, and many funeral homes now have trained and registered prearrangement counselors to guide families through the process.

### **Selecting with whom you will entrust your arrangements is an important decision.**

The first step is to select the funeral home you wish to ultimately handle your arrangements. For many this is as easy as calling the Director your family has dealt with before and already established a trusting relationship. For others it is seeking recommendations from friends in the community, and perhaps, where there are competing funeral home facilities, conducting a comparison of services and charges.

My personal recommendation is that you try to deal with a funeral home that is independently owned and operated. Independent funeral homes, as opposed to those that are owned by conglomerate organizations, are typically less driven by their "bottom lines", and have more flexibility with which to deal with the families they serve.

### **Selecting a funeral home (continued)**

Take time to ask who owns the firm. You may be surprised and find out that a large corporation that owns other funeral homes throughout the nation has purchased what you think is a locally owned funeral home. Do not take for granted that the local home that has served a community for several generations is still locally owned. It makes good sense to know with whom you are dealing.

The Funeral Director whose name is on the sign tends to be very responsive to the particular needs and desires of the families he/she serves. The Funeral Director who has a personal stake in his/her own business generally wants to feel especially good about himself/herself when he/she meets you in the supermarket, or bumps into you at a local restaurant. He/She is less concerned with short term profit margins and more concerned with maintaining a long term relationship with your family.

Again, I encourage you to deal with an independently owned funeral home business.

### **What type of service and what level of service are right for you?**

Once you have determined who is to handle your arrangements, you can then decide what type of service and what level of service you desire. The type of service will typically be either burial or cremation. The level of service will range from direct disposition burial or cremation to full traditional ceremony, and the cost will be in proportion to the level of service you select. It all boils down to individual needs, desires and peace of mind, and the arrangement process is about determining what is appropriate for you and your family.

If you prefer casket burial you have essentially three options:

- ❑ Direct disposition immediate burial is the most basic and least expensive of these options. This level of disposition typically does not involve embalming\*\* or any funeral ceremony.
- ❑ Burial with graveside service only would be the next level of consideration. This level of disposition typically involves embalming and a “graveside” ceremony held at the cemetery. A visitation/viewing may or may not be desired.
- ❑ Burial with traditional service is the more involved and expensive of the three. This level of disposition typically involves embalming, visitation/viewing and a traditional funeral ceremony that is held either at the funeral home or at a church.

**\*\*Only under certain circumstances, such as shipment across state lines, does Florida law require embalming. State law does require that if a deceased person is not embalmed he/she must be buried or refrigerated within 24 hours of death. Embalming is appropriate and desirable when a public visitation/viewing is to be held.**

### Type and level of service (continued)

If you prefer cremation, you again have essentially three options:

- Direct disposition cremation is the most basic and least expensive of these options. This level of disposition involves no embalming, but a mandatory 48-hour refrigeration period prior to the cremation process is required in the State of Florida. There is also no funeral ceremony.
- Cremation with memorial ceremony is the next level of consideration. This level of disposition involves no embalming, but a mandatory 48-hour refrigeration period prior to the cremation process is required. A memorial funeral ceremony, with or without the cremated remains present, is typically scheduled at the family's convenience and held either at the funeral home, church, community center, or elsewhere.
- Cremation with traditional funeral ceremony is the more involved of the three. This level of disposition involves embalming while still offering the cost savings of cremation and providing the traditional aspects of a visitation/viewing and funeral ceremony. In this scenario the visitation/viewing and funeral ceremony take place with the deceased person in either a rental casket or a casket suitable for cremation. The cremation process takes place following the funeral service (and the 48-hour waiting period). Again, the funeral ceremony is typically held at the funeral home or a church.

There are certainly other variables that can come into play. However, these sets of options are the bases from which you may begin your considerations. The balance of your arrangement decisions flow from this point.

### Burial Caskets and Vaults, Cremation Caskets/Containers and Urns

To this point you have considered who is to handle your arrangements, the type and level of service you desire and where final disposition is to take place. Selecting a burial casket (and vault if applicable\*\*) or appropriate cremation casket/container and urn comes next.

**\*\* Remember:** If you decide to utilize a National Cemetery, the VA provides you with a concrete grave liner\*; so selecting a vault is not necessary unless you prefer to do so. If you decide that a private cemetery is best for you it is important to realize that most cemeteries require the use of a vault or concrete grave liner, and it will be necessary for you to select one you feel is appropriate.

\* **A grave liner** is simply a concrete box with a lid that encases the casket but does not seal. It is utilized to prevent the grave site from settling. Alternatively, vaults do seal and provide additional protection for the casket.

***Important Note:*** Before we look at the options, let me give you a sincere word of advice. ***It is not necessary for you to spend any more money for any of this than it takes to satisfy your peace of mind.*** Again, do not be pressured into

doing any more than it takes to *satisfy your peace of mind*. When you boil it all down, that is what this process is really all about.

**Burial Casket Selection:** Burial caskets can be selected from a variety that ranges from cloth covered wood to bronze, and many options in between. Burial caskets are generally made of either metal or wood and are priced according to the type of metal or the type of wood from which they are manufactured.

A.) **Metal** - From most expensive to least the typical options are bronze, copper, stainless steel, 18-gauge standard steel and 20-gauge standard steel. (18 and 20 gauge refers to the thickness of the steel; 18 gauge being somewhat thicker than 20)

B.) **Wood** – From most expensive to least the typical options are mahogany, cherry, maple, oak, pine, poplar and cloth covered pressed particle wood.

- **Burial Vault Selection:** Typically required by cemeteries, a vault that seals, or a grave liner that does not seal, encases the casket and is intended to prevent the grave from settling. As is the case with burial caskets, vaults are also priced according to the type of materials from which they are manufactured. Vaults are most often formed with concrete and the interior lined with (from most expensive to least) bronze, copper, stainless steel, marble, stryntex or plastic. A grave liner is simply a concrete box with a concrete lid.
- **Cremation Casket/Container Selection:** It is important to understand that most crematories require a deceased individual be in a container suitable for cremation to facilitate placing the deceased into the crematorium. Simply stated, the cremation process takes place with the deceased in the cremation casket/container selected. The ashes of this cremation container become a part of the cremated remains as the cremation process is completed. *(This has nothing to do with the urn into which the cremated remains may later be placed.)*

This selection has much to do with the level of cremation service you determine is appropriate for you. Because there are various levels of service, there are also various cremation casket/container options available. They are all manufactured out of combustible material and can be classified in two categories, commonly referred to as Alternative Containers and Cremation Caskets. Rental Caskets for more traditional services are also available.

## Caskets, vaults, cremation containers and urns (continued)

- I. **Alternative Containers** – Relatively inexpensive and modest, these cremation containers are typically made of simple cardboard, fiberboard or particleboard. These types of containers are appropriate when a minimal level of service, such as direct cremation, is preferred.
- II. **Cremation Caskets** – From most expensive to least these options are typically mahogany, cherry, oak, pine and poplar. Wood cremation caskets are manufactured quite differently than regular burial caskets and are therefore considerably less expensive. Primarily, cremation caskets are manufactured with little or no metal parts. These types of caskets are appropriate when cremation with more traditional services (visitation/viewing and/or funeral ceremony) are preferred.
- III. **Rental Caskets** – Many funeral homes also offer rental caskets as another option when cremation with traditional services is desired. Under this scenario the deceased is in the rental casket for the visitation/viewing and funeral ceremony, and then transferred to an alternative container (see I. above) for the cremation process. Rental caskets are manufactured in such a way that the interior bedding materials are replaced after each use.

## Urns

- I. **Traditional** – Typically made out of marble and the metals and woods previously mentioned for caskets, urns are designed for display, storage, burial or scattering. Relative pricing for urns depends upon the purpose they serve and the materials from which they are made.
- II. **Non-Traditional** – Beyond the realm of customary urns, there is now an array of memorialization options. These range from small trinket keepsake and jewelry containers to paper maché for water disposition, to wind chimes, bird baths and garden benches (to name a few).

## *We've covered a lot of ground*

Hopefully you've learned some things you didn't know and found answers to some questions you may have had. Most likely you now have some new questions and if that is the case, we are on the right track. You may realize for the first time that there is more to all of this than you thought your loved ones would be faced with. If you are feeling that you need to start considering your options and making some decisions, thereby relieving your family of the burden, then I gain gratification from the effort.

Obviously in this format there is no way to cover all of the possible variables and details associated with this type of planning. However, If I have made you aware of your eligible benefits, provided direction for utilizing those benefits, given insight pertaining to funeral homes, types and levels of funeral home services and burial and cremation merchandise, then I have accomplished my goal in providing this information for you.

The last piece of ground I would like to cover with you has to do with funeral and cremation costs, and options you have relative to paying for them. Please do not misunderstand; burial and cemetery costs are free to veterans and eligible dependents who utilize a National or State Sponsored Veteran's Cemetery. The funeral home costs associated with getting you there, however, are not covered by VA benefits.

It is very important that you plan ahead and avoid the additional decisions, stress, and costs your family will likely face if you don't.

## *Again, there are several options when considering how to pay a funeral home for its services.*

Much has changed in the funeral industry from the time my great grandfather, grandfather and their contemporaries conducted business. Not the least of which are the methods of paying for the services a funeral home provides.

There was a day when families who couldn't afford to pay their at-need funeral bill right away could be trusted to make payments until the bill was satisfied. There was a day when funeral homes could be trusted to properly handle the money of those who wished to pre-fund their arrangements.

All of that came to an end when some funeral homes began to abuse their fiduciary responsibilities, and when some families began to take advantage of the trust-worthy funeral home's good faith. Sadly, some unscrupulous funeral homes and some irresponsible families forced changes for everyone.

Now families who wish to pre-fund their arrangements rely on the State to heavily regulate and serve as watchdog over the funeral industry. The funeral industry requires that payment for at-need services be secured prior to those services being rendered.

**You may choose to pre-fund your arrangements or wait until the time of need.** There are pre-funding payment options and there are options for payment at the time of need, when services are actually rendered. Depending on your school of thought, there are advantages to either direction you decide to take.

***Important!! Pre-arranging does not necessarily mean pre-payment! Please!! Do not back away from planning ahead because you do not desire or cannot afford pre-funding.***

In my opinion, any funeral home worth its salt will not require you to pre-fund your arrangements if you do not wish to do so. My family's firms are happy to establish what is referred to as a courtesy arrangement file for anyone who desires to set their arrangements up that way. A nominal administrative fee for establishing non-funded prearrangements is not unreasonable, but there should be no pressure for you to pre-pay the arrangements if your family prefers to wait. Many funeral homes will set up courtesy files for no charge.

Keep in mind that today's funeral home is motivated by the promise of future business. By taking care of things ahead of time you actually hold a lot of the playing cards in your hands. I'll say it again; in my opinion, there is no down side to planning ahead. Your posture is proactive instead of reactive, you make reasoned decisions without the effects of undue stress, you likely spend less, and you avoid shifting the decision making burden to your loved ones.

#### **To prepay or not to prepay?**

The answer to this question lies primarily in your financial situation and your opinion of the merits either way. I'm going to offer you valid considerations for both and from there you can draw your own conclusions.

In my estimation the most favorable reason for pre-funding is that it relieves your loved ones of that concern. When death occurs, the worst part of the arrangement process for everyone involved, including the funeral director, is taking care of the financial aspect of the arrangements. There is nothing a family appreciates more than finding out that financially there is nothing for them to worry about.

Second only to what I've just discussed is the fact that when prepayment is made, most funeral homes guarantee their services and merchandise at the prearranged cost. With the ever increasing costs of funeral goods and

services this can represent a very significant financial savings benefit at the time of need.

In tracking my family's firms' experience for the last forty years, history has shown that costs, on average, have doubled every ten years. Inasmuch as my family's firms' charges have historically been at or below industry average, I feel comfortable in using that experience as a rule of thumb for estimating future trends. Even if costs increased by only 50% over the next ten years, considerable savings can still be achieved by establishing funded prearrangements that are guaranteed by the funeral home.

The potential drawback is that if you pre-fund your arrangements you no longer have use of those dollars, and that is a very valid consideration.

You can maintain use of your money by setting it aside in some type of personal investment vehicle and allowing it to draw investment interest. However, by taking this direction it is important for you utilize an investment vehicle that will provide you enough after tax growth to keep pace with increasing funeral costs. You know better than anyone what types of investments with which you are comfortable and what rates of return you can reasonably expect to achieve.

Obviously no one else knows what is best for your financial situation, but consider this food for thought: If you are going to set the money aside anyway, it may be worth going ahead and putting it in the prearrangement account that guarantees the funeral home's services and merchandise for you. You will most likely never pay less for funeral home services than what you can/will pay today.

Once you decide whether to prepay or wait until the time of need, you can then consider the particular options that apply to the direction you choose. Next we will look at those choices.

### **Payment options at the actual time of need**

From an explanation standpoint, payment at the time of need is somewhat less involved so that's what we'll discuss first.

Most any funeral home you deal with today is going to require that provision for payment in full be made before services are rendered. In other words, before they will provide any services, you are going to have to satisfy the entire bill. You will probably have several methods available for satisfying this requirement, but a requirement it will most likely be.

As I mentioned before, the days of trusting people to honor the terms of extended payment arrangements are, for the most part, unfortunately in the past. I will share with you that in each of two consecutive years in the early 1990s one of my family's firms experienced over \$60,000 in uncollected

payments. That trend had begun several years before and it finally forced the adoption of the before mentioned payment policy.

It was not something my family wanted to do or were happy about. It was extremely difficult to tell families that extended payment arrangements could no longer be accommodated, especially since so many of the families had become accustomed to dealing that way. However, with the financial integrity of our firms seriously at stake, there was no alternative. My family simply could not afford to continue absorbing the losses that were being experienced.

Families who choose to wait until the time of need may typically satisfy payment in full by one of the following methods:

- ❖ **Cash**
- ❖ **Personal Check**
- ❖ **Credit Card**
- ❖ **Life Insurance Assignment**
  - a. **Benefits and beneficiary must be verifiable.**
  - b. **Beneficiary must be available to sign the death claim and assignment forms.**

There is nothing inexpensive about the services that funeral homes provide. Most funeral care providers fully understand and appreciate that the costs associated with establishing funeral arrangements represent a major financial consideration for most families.

**Because we've seen and felt what a family goes through when they come to the time of need unprepared, it cannot be stressed strongly enough how important it is to properly plan ahead.**

### **Options for prepayment**

There are a couple of things important for you to understand before we get into the methods of pre-funding funeral arrangements.

First of all you need to understand that each state has its own laws and requirements regulating its funeral care industry. What I share with you regarding the prepayment of funeral arrangements will be based on the regulations applicable in the State of Florida. Florida laws are likely similar to those of other states, but the differences that may exist could affect your options and your decisions.

Secondly, recall that I earlier mentioned there have been funeral homes that abused their fiduciary responsibilities as related to families who wished to prepay their arrangements. In other words, there were some funeral care providers who handled pre-arrangement funds improperly and took advantage of the trust families had placed in them by establishing funded prearrangements.

This abuse by some in the funeral care industry led to regulations that prohibit funeral homes in Florida from being responsible for prepayment dollars. For consumer protection the State of Florida now requires that when you pre-fund your arrangements a third party entity serving as custodian of your funds must be involved. Your money does not go to the funeral home to be held until the time of need. Your money goes to the third party custodian, which becomes responsible for handling your funds until needed to pay for services rendered by the funeral home.

The particular third party custodian depends on which type of funding vehicle or vehicles the funeral home offers. Typically, the funeral home may offer a **trust account**, a **life insurance account** (which has nothing to do with personal life insurance you may have) **or both**. Either way, State regulations and annual reporting requirements in Florida are *very stringent* and they help to ensure that your arrangements are securely maintained.

Because of the varying terms and provisions of different trust accounts I can only provide you with a very general overview. You will need to discuss the details of trusting with the funeral director or prearrangement counselor of the funeral home you choose to utilize.

- ❖ **Trust Account:** Typically managed by a bank trust department, your funds are deposited into the trust with you as the purchaser and/or beneficiary of funeral goods and services. At the time of your initial deposit the funeral home may be entitled to receive a portion of the deposited amount as current working capital. The amount to which the funeral home may initially be entitled depends upon the type of trust account utilized.

The account is typically invested to increase in value by growth or interest until the time of need when the funeral home claims the proceeds for rendering the agreed upon goods and services. At the time of need the funeral home is entitled to the balance of funds in the account, including the interest. It is the growth and/or interest that, if they do so, allows the funeral home to guarantee its goods and services for you.

(In the State of Florida) If the account value exceeds the funeral home charges that are applicable at the time of need, any excess should be refunded to your family. If the account value is less than the funeral home charges applicable at the time of need but your costs have been guaranteed, the funeral home should absorb the shortfall.

**VERY IMPORTANT NOTE:** The cost of “cash advance” items (such as death certificates, opening and closing the grave, obituary notices and flowers) are **NOT** typically guaranteed. Most

**funeral homes are not responsible for providing these items and therefore have no control over whether or not their cost goes up. Most often a funeral home can only guarantee charges for the goods and services it provides.**

Funeral homes that guarantee the goods and services of prepaid arrangements most often require that a trust account be fully funded before the cost is actually frozen. If you wish the cost of the services you select to be immediately guaranteed, you will likely be asked to pay your arrangements in full at the time they are established. This allows the account to begin growing and/or drawing interest, thereby justifying the funeral home's guarantee.

Funeral homes will typically offer some type of payment arrangement for those who are unable to initially prepay their arrangements in full. The amount of time allowed for payments may be limited to a few months or a year and, as I mentioned earlier, goods and services may not be guaranteed until full funding has been achieved. Also, any unpaid amount will be due at the time of need.

- ❖ **Life Insurance:** Now offered by many funeral homes as a primary alternative to trusts, life insurance has added a new dimension to prepaying funeral/cremation arrangements. Many can benefit from the flexibility, extended payment options and benefit method that prearrangement life insurance provides.

In this case all prearrangement funds go to the life insurance company that has been contracted by the funeral home to fund/underwrite its prearrangement contracts.

The insurance company issues a life insurance contract for you, which you own, in the amount of the agreed upon funeral home charges, and, typically, the death benefit is *revocably* assigned to the funeral home. When the time of need arrives and services are rendered, the funeral home submits its claim, and receives payment directly from the insurance company.

Similar to trust accounts, prearrangement life insurance contracts are also designed to increase in value until the funeral home submits its claim for goods and services rendered. Again, if the funeral home has guaranteed its charges, it is entitled to the value of the contract, including the growth, at the time the claim is made.

Stipulations pertaining to excess proceeds and shortfall are the same as were explained for trust accounts.

The primary differences between trusts and life insurance are seen in the increased options for extended payment arrangements, and the way the death benefit proceeds are paid at the time of need.

If so desired, the insurance contract can be fully funded at the time it is established. However, many families benefit from the opportunity to establish payment arrangements that may typically stretch over one, three, five or ten years.

In this case the funeral home is still able to guarantee its goods and services because the insurance company pays the funeral home *in full* whenever the time of need arrives. This is true at any time the contract is in force *regardless of how long payments have been made* (a standard two year contestability period\* does apply). If the funeral home has guaranteed the goods and services, your family should owe no more money when the insurance company pays the funeral home (except where increased charges for “cash advance” items may be involved).

\*If death occurs within two years of establishing the contract (with the exception of single payment), the insurance company is entitled to contest the claim. They do this to ensure the applicant was truthful and to protect itself from the potential of suicide.

**Example 1:** You establish a life insurance prearrangement contract and agree to monthly payments for five years. Three years into the contract, death occurs and funeral services are rendered. The funeral home submits its claim to the insurance company and receives payment in full. Your family does **NOT** owe the balance of two years payments for your contract because the funeral home’s bill is covered in full by the life insurance policy. If, for instance, the charge for opening and closing your grave (“cash advance” item) has increased by \$50, your family is responsible for the \$50 increase for opening and closing.

**Example 2:** Same five year contract but you live ten years instead of three. After five years you have a paid in full contract that is valid for the rest of your life. In the tenth year, death occurs and funeral services are rendered. The funeral home submits its claim to the insurance company and receives payment in full. Your family does not owe any more money for funeral goods and services, but may owe more for increases in any of the “cash advance” items.

***Please Note:*** These examples assume that you are dealing with a funeral home that guarantees its charges for services and merchandise when you establish funded prearrangements.

One other important feature of the life insurance prearrangement contract is its transferability. For families who would potentially move to another town or state, insurance contracts offer the opportunity to reassign the value of their prearrangement contract to another funeral home. It is as simple as changing the assignment from one funeral home to another.

If needed, the funeral home with which you established your prearrangements should assist you in locating a firm where you are moving that will accept your contract. Most funeral homes are happy to accept transferred arrangements and many times they will do so for the costs to which you originally agreed. There are instances, however, when you may have to renegotiate the charges.

And there you have it! I've now shared with you virtually everything I know about veteran burial/cremation benefits and funeral/cremation prearrangements. It is my sincere hope that you have found it helpful and informative, and a comfortable way to look into and learn about a topic that is not so pleasant to contemplate.

I have attempted to cover as many bases and answer as many questions for you as I could anticipate. I realize, however, that there may be questions you still have.

By reading this information and seeking answers to your questions, you are on the right track. Let me once again encourage you to continue until you ensure that your loved ones can avoid the unique distress that too often occurs when prearrangements are not in place.

***It likely will one day mean more to them than you will ever know!***

Sincerely,

*Jimmy Nelson*

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