

Military OneSource Podcast — Veterans Legacy Memorial Episode Transcript

Casualty and Mortuary Affairs

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools information, and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Our topic today is the Veterans Legacy Memorial. We'll get into this with our guest, who is James LaPaglia. He is with the Department of Veterans Affairs. He works in their National Cemetery Administration. And James, welcome to the podcast.

James LaPaglia:

Pleasure to be here, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

Let's get started. Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself, a little bit about your background.

James LaPaglia:

Yes, thanks. I work for the Department of Veterans Affairs. I have been at the VA for about six years, a couple years in the secretary's office and now here at the National Cemetery Administration. I am a retired Air Force public affairs officer, and I live in Baltimore, Maryland, with my husband and two kids.

Bruce Moody:

All right, great to have you with us. Well, let's just go right into it. This Veterans Legacy Memorial, what is it and how did it come about?

James LaPaglia:

Veterans Legacy Memorial is an end-of-life benefit that the VA offers. Right now, the site has more than 4.8 million interactive pages, each for a veteran that is interred at one of our VA national cemeteries, at one of 27 Department of Defense cemeteries, at one of our veteran cemetery grant programs. Veteran cemeteries at the state and tribal level that the VA funds.

And then we have a couple of National Park Service cemeteries in VLM right now. We launched VLM in 2019 over Memorial Day weekend. At first it was just a static site for the first year. It was just merely picking up information from the database, included information from the Veterans' Service Records, included resting place information from the cemetery, and we started making the site interactive in 2020.

Bruce Moody:

Who does this site honor?

James LaPaglia:

This site honors all American veterans who are authorized to receive VA benefits.

Bruce Moody:

Who's eligible for inclusion in this memorial?

James LaPaglia:

Eligibility is determined by whether they are eligible to receive VA benefits. Our goal is to eventually have a page for every veteran no matter where they are interred. Currently we have 4.8 million pages, but that will continue to grow as we tap into other databases and then continue to grow after that as we try to have a page for every veteran.

Bruce Moody:

How about spouses of veterans? Are they eligible?

James LaPaglia:

Only the veterans themselves are eligible to have a page in VLM.

Bruce Moody:

Got it, got it. How many are currently recognized on this memorial?

James LaPaglia:

It's almost 4.9 million at this point. We started at 3.6 million in 2019. When we added the state and tribal cemeteries in 2020, that added about half a million pages. When we added the Department of Defense managed cemeteries, including Arlington National Cemetery this year, that added another 300,000 pages into VLM. And then of course we've had the natural pace of internments over the past four or five years.

Bruce Moody:

Got it. When people go to this memorial, what will they see with the tributes? What do you include in the tributes?

James LaPaglia:

What they'll see on the landing page is a search feature to try to find their veteran, because there's almost 3.9 million pages right now. They need to find their veteran, their loved one. And they're presented with three or four fields that they can populate, including last name, first name, year of death, cemetery location and service branch. Only the last name is required, but they can populate other fields to try to narrow down their search.

But once they found their veteran and click on the service deal that represents their veteran in the search, they'll be presented with that dedicated page for that veteran. And upfront on the page, they will be looking at the veteran's service information and their date of birth and their date of death.

It'll include things such as what branch of service did they serve in, what was their rank? Did they have any decorations? What war period did they serve in? And then they'll have resting place information, if we have that in the database. And that will include the cemetery name and location.

If we have an interment date in a grave site location, that will be displayed on the page, as well as a clickable map that will take them to the cemetery. And if we have grave site information, then the clickable map will include a pin that's actually at the cemetery where the grave site is located. And you can get step-by-step directions to the grave site.

Let me answer your next question, which was about tributes. Tributes is one of the types of content that users can upload to the site. And tributes is just a text field that you can add images to if you want to. It's similar to what you might see on Facebook, and it's a 5,000-character link text field that you can tell a story, share a memory, a simple thank you for your service.

It's really the most popular content feature that we have right now, is tributes. And we see a lot of variety in the tributes that are submitted. We see grief, sometimes it's very raw grief, but we also see laughter. We see storytelling. We see memories being shared.

The variety of topics touches on everyday life for the veteran and their family. But it also touches on issues that are important to the veteran community and to the VA. We have tributes that talk about burn pits, PTSD, veteran suicide, GI bill, disability benefits, racism that the veteran may have experienced, serving during don't ask, don't tell. We see the current issues facing the VA and veterans today all over VLM with these tributes.

Bruce Moody:

I have a follow-up question about the tributes because you do mention that some of them are very, very raw and others maybe include humor. That makes me think that people are providing these tributes at various points in their grieving process. Is it possible for someone to update their tribute?

James LaPaglia:

It is not possible for them to update their tribute. We do have other types of content that a user can update or change, but the tributes is something that is fixed. Their choice at that point is if they're a registered member for VLM, they can have that content removed and upload a new tribute. But for those types of content, there are portions of the content that can be edited. They can go in and make changes.

Bruce Moody:

What if there's a mistake or incomplete information about a veteran that needs to be updated?

James LaPaglia:

This happens frequently. I would say that we get in two or three of these a week from family members usually, but researchers as well or historians. And they might tell us that the last name is spelled incorrectly, or the date of birth is wrong or the service branch is incorrect.

A wide variety of data that might be displaying incorrectly on the VLM page for that veteran. And what that means is that the database behind that record also has that inaccuracy. And we take that information, and we go back to the source. In this case it would be a cemetery, whether it's a VA national cemetery, a state and tribal national cemetery, one of the DOD cemeteries or one of the park service cemeteries. And we'll go back to that cemetery and ask them to look through their records, their documentation they have on that veteran, and to see if what the family member or user is telling us is correct and then to make the correction in the database.

And then we have a nightly pull where we pull in information for the records. And if there's been a change in the records, such as a service branch or a date of death, we'll automatically pull in the changes from those databases so that the page will display correctly.

Bruce Moody:

Can the tributes be shared over social media?

James LaPaglia:

Any of the 3.9 million pages that we have can be shared over social media platforms. And it's a button that's near the top of every veteran's page. It says "share," and it allows a user to share to a list of email addresses if they want to, or it will automatically connect to their Facebook account or their Twitter account. It will include a hyperlink and an image of the service branch or a personalized image of the veteran, if there is one on the page, in the social media post.

Bruce Moody:

James, this is a really interesting conversation. We're going to put in the program notes, a link to the Veterans Legacy Memorial. We'll also put several other links. These get into funeral planning for Arlington National Cemetery, gets into your benefits for funeral and burial as a service member. And there's a number of other resources that people can check out for a deeper dive into this topic. But in terms of how you'd like to wrap up this conversation, is there anything else that you'd like our listeners to understand?

James LaPaglia:

When we launched VLM in 2019, we wanted to go beyond the confines of the physical cemetery. And the site that we have allows users to have that cemetery experience no matter where they are.

For example, you often see in cemeteries family members standing at a headstone or a marker and they might be talking to their loved one. But that scenario is a one-off at that one time, at that one location, with just those people who happen to be there. And VLM takes it out into the digital space and allows the memorialization or allows that conversation and that memory sharing to be done from anywhere. And we do have people submit content to VLM, and it looks like they're having a conversation with their veteran, just as you would see in a cemetery. It's not just the sharing of memories amongst survivors and others, it's oftentimes that conversation with a loved one who has passed.

I think it's important for users to know that this platform that we offer to honor veterans really encapsulates that cemetery experience in the digital space.

There's a couple other things that I think are important. To date, we've had about 70,000 engagements on the site, which each one of those engagements is ... is a piece of content. It might be a word for a word cloud, it might be a biography, it might be a photograph or it might be a tribute. And every single one of those 70,000 items was reviewed by my team, by a team of moderators. Every item that comes through is moderated, and we make sure that the content follows the user guide and user policies and that it appropriately honors veterans. And we have a really good acceptance rate.

We have a reject rate of less than 2%. And even a lot of those are rejected because customers may reach out to us and say, "Hey, there's an error in what I submitted. Can you take that away?" And we'll reject it or take it off the site.

I think it's important for users to understand that everything that comes in from users that submitted, goes through a review process to make sure that it appropriately honors veterans.

I think the last thing I'd like to share is, here's the call to action. We encourage everybody to go to VLM and try to find their veteran or a veteran they might be connected to, whether they might've served with that veteran, or maybe the veteran is interred in a cemetery that is near them and has a connection to their hometown. Or maybe it was a veteran who was a teacher in their school and they were growing up. Find a veteran that has a connection to you and share a memory, honor them, tell a story, keep their memory alive by using VLM.

Bruce Moody:

James, thank you for joining us today and talking to us about the Veterans Legacy Memorial. Appreciate you being with us.

James LaPaglia:

It was my pleasure. Thanks, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

James LaPaglia is with the Department of Veterans Affairs. He works at the National Cemetery Administration. And want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department, and we want to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. Send us a comment, a question or maybe an idea for a future episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcast because we cover a wide range of topics that help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for listening. Take care. Bye-Bye.