

Inside People: Red tape an obstacle for entry into national cemeteries

by John Wilkins

Earl Holland, a World War II veteran, had long thought of Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery in San Diego as a dignified place to be buried.

ASHES TO RED TAPE - Elizabeth Holland didn't know her husband, Earl, when he was 20 and in the Army Air Corps (family photo, inset), but she said he was proud of his military service and wanted Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery to be his final resting place. 'We thought we were going to have a place to come visit him,' she said. CNS Photo by Sean DuFrene. When he died two years ago, his wife, Elizabeth, wasn't ready emotionally for a funeral. She scattered half of his cremated remains from a plane over the Pacific Ocean, then kept the other half in an urn by her bed.

This fall, she was finally ready. She was told to show up at 2 p.m. on Oct. 29 for the service at Fort Rosecrans, an 80-acre sea of green grass and white marble headstones, the final resting place for vets and their relatives, about 91,000 people in all.

Her three grown children took off work to be there. Two grandkids came along. They brought flowers, including a wreath in the cardinal and gold colors of the University of Southern California, Earl's alma mater.

But once they arrived, they were turned away. We'll play a recording of "Taps" for you, they were told. We'll let the military honor guard fold the flag and present it to you. But the urn? No.

The family had apparently run afoul of a cemetery policy that forbids the inurnment of partial remains.

"It took me two years to crank up my courage to get there, and to be shut out at the door - well, I felt a little like Mary on the donkey being told there's no room at the inn," Elizabeth said.

Cemetery officials now admit they were wrong. The rule had been misapplied. Officials in Washington, D.C., reviewed the case and agreed to let the family schedule another service to give Earl Holland a proper send-off.

"I'm just grateful that there's been a resolution," Elizabeth said, "because it's really been a nightmare."

Earl was born in 1923 and grew up in Illinois. He went into cadet school for the Army Air Corps when he was 20 and served for three years at the tail end of World War II.

His wife said he was a pilot, but she doesn't know many details of his military record. He was like a lot of service members of his generation - tight-lipped about what he went through.

Besides, she didn't meet him until almost 20 years after the war ended. He'd moved on to other things, like trying to start a business selling washers and dryers to apartment owners.

That's what he was doing when he came into her office in Las Vegas for the first time, in 1963. He asked to speak to the person in charge. "That would be me," she told him. He asked for her supervisor, so she sent him to a different office.

A short time later, he came back, a little sheepish. "They told me you make the decisions," he said.

Recalling that episode while standing in the living room of her home recently, Elizabeth laughed and said, "That's the last time he ever pulled the macho act on me."

They were married in 1964. She had a 9-year-old son from a previous marriage, and Earl adopted him right away. They had two other children together, a son and a daughter.

They came to California in 1976 so he could be superintendent for a three-year construction project. They lived across the street and he walked to work.

After that, they spent eight years in Kansas City, where he helped run a labor union. Then he spent some time at the San Onofre nuclear power plant near San Clemente, Calif.

They bought a house in a gated-community in Vista, Calif., five years ago. Retired, he enjoyed spending time with his grandchildren, Elizabeth said. Sometimes they'd go to Point Loma, to the lighthouse, and he'd remark about the quiet dignity of all those rows of markers at Fort Rosecrans.

"He thought that would be an honorable place to be," she said. "He was proud of his duty, and he wanted some place nice for his children and grandchildren to come visit him when he was gone."

But he never really expected to die, she said. He'd been active his whole life, starting businesses, scuba diving, traveling. He kept an airplane until he was in his mid-60s.

Then he got sick, from exposure in his earlier years to asbestos fibers, and he died on Nov. 2, 2005. He was 82.

Her husband had told her he wanted to be cremated, "no dog and pony show," she said. She hired a mortuary to handle the arrangements.

She said she told the mortuary she wanted to scatter half of the ashes over the ocean, where her husband liked to dive. The rest would go to Fort Rosecrans. They got the necessary permits.

Elizabeth and one of her sons scattered the ashes from a small airplane shortly after Earl died. But she wasn't ready then for the inurnment. "I just couldn't let it go," she said.

She remembers the mortuary telling her there was no time limit on the burial permit, and cemetery officials said it's not unusual for family members to delay taking that final step.

Her kids finally convinced her this year to move on, she said. She called the mortuary, they called the cemetery, and the ceremony was set for Oct. 29 at 2 p.m.

Her daughter, Kaja Holland, said she called the mortuary the day before to make sure everything was in order. When they arrived at the cemetery, they handed over the permit. An official looked at the paperwork and said, "We can't do this."

They were told there were two problems: The permit was too old, and the urn had only partial remains. "We were pretty upset," Kaja Holland said. "The family had taken time off, and we were emotionally prepared to put him to rest in a respectful way."

The official pulled Elizabeth aside, she said, and suggested a solution: Have the mortuary get a new permit, and this time don't write on it that the urn has only half of the ashes.

"I don't feel like I should have to fraudulently enter my husband in a national cemetery," she said. "He did his time. He earned it. If they had a rule about partial remains, somebody should have made it clearer."

Kaja Holland said the family was whisked to a place where chairs had been set up. "Taps" was played and the flag was presented. "We didn't even have time to get the flowers out," she said.

Michael Nacincik, a spokesman for the National Cemetery Administration, which oversees about 125 burial grounds in 39 states, said the worker at Rosecrans had misapplied the rule about partial remains.

The rule, established in 1997, is designed to prevent ashes from being split and placed in more than one federal cemetery, Nacincik said. Space in national cemeteries is at a premium. It's not supposed to bar partial remains from going into a single grave site.

He contacted the National Cemetery Administration by e-mail on Nov. 14. "We went ahead and initiated a review and determined he is eligible," Nacincik said.

They contacted Elizabeth Holland late in the afternoon on Dec. 6 - about eight hours after a Southern California newspaper had started asking questions about the case - and told her she could schedule another ceremony.

"I was speechless," she said. But happy.

She said she plans to follow through early in 2008.

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