

Once again we are observing with reverence the sacrifices made by our brethren in arms who did not come back. Some died flying helicopters in Germany (my first West Point roommate), others died after having served their country well and living a full life and a few died heroically sacrificing themselves for the good of their fellow soldiers. On Memorial Day we annually spend the day acknowledging their service to the country and personal sacrifice. That is why this month I chose to write about the Georgia National Cemetery 60 miles away in Canton Ga.

If you are a veteran with active duty service, who was not dishonorably discharged and has not been convicted of a capital crime, then you are probably eligible for the benefit of internment in a national cemetery such as in Canton at no charge. Yes, the final resting place, headstone with inscription, perpetual maintenance of the site for qualified, is a benefit you earned in service. The veteran's estate is still responsible for the cremation of the remains or mortuary services and casket should that be desired, or any funeral home services arranged such as a memorial. One's own monument to our earthly life becomes part of something bigger than us, as part of a national monument to the soldiers of all eras and all wars, just as our service in the military was in support of causes or purposes greater than our own self-interest.

Establishing your eligibility can be done with the National Cemetery Scheduling Office over the phone at 800/535-1117 and choosing option 3 to get the eligibility section. The whole process of qualifying for internment can be simplified by sending in a pre-need application, which allows the VA to establish your eligibility for internment based upon your military service and a background check. Once established, the VA will issue a letter of eligibility. Keep it with your Last Will and Testament and any instructions you might have for your executor/ next of kin, regarding your affairs. Arrangements can now be made with a quick call back to the Scheduling Office, and the arrangement will be made with Canton to assign a grave site, order the headstone with the appropriate engravings, and outline options for committal services within the park.

Please think this through ahead of time my fellow veterans, since making the arrangements in advance saves a great deal of grief for your loved ones. Widows rummaging through drawers to find your discharge paperwork when they are devastated from losing you and under the time pressure of having to intern you within a few days occur on a far too common basis. Be as protective of them in death as you were in life.

Being part of something bigger than ourselves, for many of us, is comforting as we pass. Should you be interested, a Memorial Day Program will be held at the Georgia National Cemetery at 10 am on Saturday 27, May. The public is invited to attend and encouraged to contact the Canton office at any time to learn more details about the facilities, arrangements and procedures.