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Funds for Clark's 'forgotten cemetery' hang in balance

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THE CLARK Veterans Cemetery in the Clark Freeport keeps the remains of more than 8,000 US war veterans, US Army Philippine Scouts and their family members. E.I. REYMOND OREJAS

The release of a \$5-million fund for the restoration and maintenance of the Clark Veterans Cemetery, called the “forgotten cemetery in the Philippines,” remains uncertain, an official of the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) said.

In a recent letter to war veterans in the former American air base, Joseph Maxwell Cleland, ABMC secretary, said while the commission understands the clamor of retired soldiers for the United States government to take care of the cemetery, the commission’s hands are tied.

“As you know, the US and the Philippine governments are negotiating an agreement to allow us to maintain the cemetery. We cannot predict when, or if such an agreement will be reached, but until then we have no authority to act,” Cleland said in his letter to retired US Army 1st Sgt. John Gilbert, commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 2485 and chair of the Clark Veterans Cemetery.

“We are prepared to begin basic maintenance activities as soon as an agreement [between the US and Philippine governments] is signed, as well as a full assessment of the cemetery’s condition so we can recommend and seek funding for appropriate restoration work,” he said.

The clamor of American war veterans and former military servicemen came as the US Congress passed a law that mandates the restoration and maintenance of the Clark Veterans Cemetery in this former American air base.

US Senate Bill No. 2320, known as Remembering America’s Forgotten Veterans Cemetery Act of 2012, was sponsored by New Hampshire Republican Sen. Kelly Ayotte. It was passed by the US Congress and signed into law by President Barack Obama on Jan. 11.

Ayotte’s counterpart measure in the US House of Representatives was HR (House of Representatives) 4168, known as Caring for the Fallen Act, and sponsored by New Hampshire Republican Rep. Frank Guinta.

The law directs the Arlington, Virginia-based ABMC to restore and maintain the Clark Veterans Cemetery and allots \$5 million for the purpose.

But officials of the Clark Veterans Cemetery Restoration Association (CVCRA), a group mostly composed of war veterans and former US military servicemen, said the takeover by ABMC of the cemetery remains an “illusion” to this day.

Through a memorandum of agreement with the Clark Development Corp., the VFW Post 2485 started maintaining the eight-hectare cemetery in 1994 after the area was buried by volcanic ash and sand as a result of Mt. Pinatubo’s 1991 eruptions.

Gilbert said the cemetery is being maintained through “donations and volunteer efforts” and without any funding from the US and Philippine governments.

“Those interred here deserve better than we can provide with our limited funding,” he said.

Gilbert said about 8,600 US veterans, US Army Philippine Scouts and their family members are buried in the cemetery.

Retired US Navy Capt. Dennis Wright, CVCRA chair, said a memorandum of agreement needs to be signed by the US and Philippine governments before the ABMC could formally take over the cemetery located near the main gate of this free port.

Wright said the US Department of State and the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs had drafted an agreement in May this year.

He said the ABMC takeover of the cemetery would be beneficial to the tourism sector, as the veterans' burial ground could become a historical landmark similar to Gen. Douglas MacArthur's landing site in Leyte, the island fortress of Corregidor, the Shrine of Valor in Bataan, the World War II American Cemetery in Metro Manila, and the Prisoners of War Memorial in Cabanatuan City.