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The overwhelming irony of natural destruction in the name of veterans

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Indiana Forest Alliance

A long-range view of the virgin tree grove inside Crown Hill Cemetery.

As a veteran, and the widow of a combat veteran, I reject the columbarium cemetery at Crown Hill as currently proposed. Certainly the Veterans Administration has a need, and chose the premier cemetery in Indianapolis to inter and honor those who served, as it is a privilege accorded by a grateful nation.

But as a Navy and Marine Corps veteran (1973-89) I am disappointed in this thoughtless destruction of the forest—the beautiful parts of my homeland I hoped to protect, among those other things such as free speech and equal protection under the law—in the most decent country on earth.

The VA plans to build ten columbaria, 28,100 niches for cremated remains in ten phases in the next 100 years. Crown Hill has sold them the most beautiful 14.75 forested acres near 42nd St. for \$875,000—around \$60,000 per acre, a totally patriotic price (yes, that’s sarcasm).

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A view from inside the tree grove.

Our tax dollars also went for an Environmental Assessment in which contractors characterized the property as a “relatively large old-growth forest” situated in “some of the largest contiguous acreages of greenspace surrounded by a fully developed urban environment in the state of Indiana and possibly the Midwest.”

All of this, as the VA project description noted, to provide “enhanced service” in a “contemplative site [which] will be nestled into the woods for privacy and serenity.”

Then they go on to describe the administration building, flagpoles, wetland drainage systems, road loop for funeral cortege, and parking. This woods, some 300- and 500-year-old white and burr oaks, will be eviscerated for hardscape. Our ashes will be put in thousands of niches in the outer walls of warehouse-like structures. The overwhelming irony of destroying our natural heritage—that which we served our country to protect—rankles me profoundly.

Apparently Crown Hill did not offer the open acreage due east on Clarendon and 42nd, where veterans’ families might memorialize their loved ones in a perimeter of tree plantings as the Europeans have done. Instead, both agencies, Crown Hill and the VA refused to look at alternatives and have cynically pursued decisions at every turn that disrespected nature, disrespected the community, and disrespected veterans.

So many combat veterans, such as my late husband, Col. Robert McInteer, lived their lives amid much death and devastation, and caused it, too. So many agreed on the day of our retirements: we’re done with devastation.

My late husband’s remains are now in our family plot at Crown Hill beneath a tree planted by my grandmother. Rows of crosses for our Civil War and WWI dead stand silently, rank and file, across the open meadow. The trees stand aside as sentinels. Let’s let them be.

—Mary Bookwalter

Former Major, U.S. Marine Corps