

A story that can't wait for the next print publication

THE CHEYENNE HERALD

the local advocacy journal

June 3, 2007

City employees accused of desecrating American flags in Olivet Cemetery

by *Dave Featherly*

The call came to me at 6:37 pm on Saturday night, June 2nd.

The caller told me he was at American Legion Post 6 and said they would like to offer me first notice about a story having to do with widespread vandalism to the American flags placed by the American Legion and others on graves of military veterans in Cheyenne cemeteries. From that initial contact and other discussions I had over the next couple hours, I learned that the considerable damage had been done by at least one city employee (many more) on a riding lawn mower. The destruction had been discovered by a volunteer, who is on active duty and stationed at F.E. Warren Air Force and had been making daily visits to the cemeteries bordered by Pershing Blvd., to insure that the flags placed by him and the many other volunteers on the Saturday before Memorial Day were standing and undamaged.

His visit on Wednesday, just prior to the rainstorm that afternoon, brought a shocking discovery. As he walked the interior area of Olivet Cemetery, he found one after another damaged, defaced and destroyed American flags. He and I walked the area on Sunday afternoon and found a few remnants of tattered flags still on the ground.

First, let me review what the arrangement between the City of Cheyenne and the veterans service organizations, primarily the American Legion for this project, has been for many, many years.

Since at least the 1930's, the local American Legion contingent has placed small American flags on the gravesites of all military veterans they could identify in the public (and private) Cheyenne cemeteries, including Beth El, Olivet and Lakeview, just as Legion posts around the country do. They no longer place flags at the Base cemetery. Since 9/11, the Air Force does that themselves.

The American Legion Post 6 cemetery chairman told me that he has been handling this assignment for 14 years and has never experienced the kind of wanton destruction and callous disrespect for veterans and the American flag that he has just witnessed. He acknowledged that the City's contact person for cemetery affairs is no longer employed by the City and there was no contact this year from anyone changing the long-standing policy of placing the flags the Saturday prior to the holiday (be it Memorial Day or Veterans Day) and removing them the Saturday following.

He also told me that in the past, should it be determined that the grounds crew needed to mow the grass before the second Saturday, cemetery workers would remove and replace the flags so mowing could be accomplished.

Every year, there are a number of flags that need to be replaced or stood back up during the week. With wind, weather, animals and human traffic, some are broken off,

knocked down, staples pull out and other damage occurs.

But there has never been anything like this.

In spite of an erroneous report by the WT-E, it is not only "war veterans" who have earned and receive this display of recognition and respect. All military veterans are included in the project. Families and friends also place flags of their own. This year, the American Legion flag program placed 3,872 flags in the various cemeteries. Volunteers include members of the Boy Scouts, ROTC, F.E. Warren active duty personnel, American Legion, VFW and DAV members and supporters and other residents of Cheyenne and the surrounding area. Some of the damaged flags and sticks used to place them can be seen in the above pictures. The flags are placed "dead center" in front of the headstone at about a foot distance from the stone. Spacing is necessary because the base of a headstone or marker may make it impossible to put the flag in the ground right next to the stone. They are to be placed in a straight line in front of that row of markers. Military veterans are buried in all areas of all Cheyenne cemeteries, not just in what is known as the "Veterans Cemetery." Identification of the gravesites of

veterans is done by placing an insignia on headstones of those known to be veterans, by using a map of the cemetery lots, and by walking and reading for such information on each headstone. They don't want to miss anyone.

Flags were laid out on several tables in the Legion Post 6 dining area. They were obviously damaged beyond what could have happened accidentally. I asked the fellow who picked them up if there was an obvious link to the mowing and he told me that tires tracks straddled the flags, sticks were broken off even with the ground and pieces of the flag material and wood were discharged beside the mower's path. Shredding of some of the above flags also indicate destruction that wasn't caused by weather.

Who would do such a thing and what sort of excuse might he have? What will become of his job with the City? Will the mayor take definitive action or tolerate this kind of disrespect of the American flag and our military veterans? Is this further proof that the Parks Dept. is out-of-control, with fights between employees routine and turnover at a dangerously high level? And who will pay? More on this story and a related one on the page below. (Scroll down)



A few of the damaged flags laid out on tables at American Legion Post 6 (June 3, 2007)



Stock photo of veterans' headstones with flags displayed



Northwest corner of veteran's area in Beth El Cemetery



At a time when Americans are being called upon to show support for an unpopular war and to demonstrate a patriotism some find harder to muster, it is unthinkable that one among us would show such contemptuous disregard and perform such wanton destruction of our symbol of freedom.

The picture above shows part of the area where military veterans are buried. They are also buried throughout the cemeteries but this is a concentration of military headstones. Decorations remain from Memorial Day, as they do throughout the cemeteries I walked on Sunday, the 3rd of June.

We are at war, for God's sake!

Is it possible that there is a household in Cheyenne that hates the flag because of their disdain toward local, county, state or national government? That, the flag, has been our last vestige of pride and hope.

Nobody hates the flag. Or do they? Does at least one?

Active duty military personnel are steadily dying and being injured in Iraq and Afghanistan. May was one of the deadliest months of the war in Iraq. Cheyenne just had the best Memorial Day parade in memory, if not ever.

What in the hell would possess a City employee to point a riding lawn mower down a path with American flags and deliberately mow over the top of them? He had to have heard the wood being chewed by the mower blades and seen the flags, or pieces of the flags, being thrown out the

side of the mower. It wasn't just one row. It was many.

It was reported to me that there were about ten City employees in the vicinity that day - some were on riding mowers (maybe four of them) and others were doing things like "weed whacking" between the headstones.

Did none of them notice the destruction being perpetrated not far from them? Or didn't any of them care?

The picture at the lower left shows a piece of a destroyed flag (in the red oval) - it was a couple feet from that headstone and was placed closer for effect.

Generally, it does not require veterans of military service to insure proper respect for the flag and regard for those who have also served. The fact that the majority of the City's governing body and other elected officials are non-veterans now should have nothing to do with preserving the rich and valued tradition so well-demonstrated by this flag placement project on Memorial Day.

The Legion also places flags on gravesites for Veterans Day but the challenge in November is cold, snow and frozen ground - not riding lawn mowers.

During my visit to American Legion Post 6 on Sunday, I was shown a program for the Memorial Day ceremonies from about ten years ago. Virtually every elected state and local official was present. This year, none were. They weren't at the Parade which was conducted at the same time. Where were they? Do they just espouse patriotism, not demonstrate it in the simplest ways?

A few years ago, this same cemetery chairman inaugurated the Avenue of Flags program, wherein large American flags line the entrance to Beth El and are displayed on the usual flag flying occasions.

Bases were placed in the ground along the route to hold the flags.

This year they were removed. And no one from the City informed the American Legion that they were removed.

They found out when they prepared for this year. To facilitate use of untreated water in the cemeteries, this may have been a necessary thing. But why has this city administration adopted their "Us Against Them" mentality?

This lack of communications is not uncommon.

Fearing confrontation, a timid administration refuses to communicate with Cheyenne residents. Residents have to find out things, learn about problems, on their own.

Obviously, the American Legion Post 6 budget pales in comparison to the City's. They do not have millions to spare nor can they request more from the State when they overspend what they have. The flag programs are important to their mission. The American Legion, like the other veterans service organizations was established to provide a place for veterans, and families of veterans, to gather and share common goals around love of country and respect for its symbols, especially the American flag.

This group of veterans is livid about this occurrence. They will be watching closely to see how the mayor handles this deliberate transgression. Was it an act of vandalism? I think it was. I suggested they file a police report as such. With the flags removed, little can be done to prosecute but it should be a matter of public record that this city administration employs miscreants who would dare such action.

If there are further developments before our next print issue on June 18th, we will update this story there.

Note: When American Legion representatives offered me an "exclusive" on this story, I discouraged them. I suggested they contact Justin Joseph of Channel 5 and also write their own press release on the story to provide the WT-E on Monday, June 4, 2007. Joseph is the only other media person in town who will sink his teeth into stories like this one and I thought this misbehavior should be shared with the public while the holiday was fresh in mind. Chris Jose of Channel 5 met with Legion officials and the person who discovered the damage and retrieved the flags, then visited Olivet with them to film further coverage. To their credits, both Channel 5 and WT-E jumped on the story. I also suggested they contact Jack Spiker on Sunday so he would know the events.

This is one I am glad to share. To sit on it for over two weeks would have been a disservice to the Legion and residents.

