

City employees accused of desecrating American flags in Olivet Cemetery

Note: This story first appeared on the Cheyenne Herald website on Monday, June 3, 2007. Recognizing that many of our readers do have access to the Internet, it is repeated here.

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 American Legion members and volunteers 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 (maybe 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 still 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 down, damaged, defaced and destroyed American flags. He and I walked the area on Sunday afternoon and still found a few remnants of tattered flags 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 public and private Cheyenne cemeteries, including Beth El, Olivet and Lakeview, as Legion posts around the country do.

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 flags the Saturday prior to the holiday (be it Memorial Day or Veterans Day) and removing them the next Saturday.

He also told me that in the past, should it be determined that the grounds crew needed to mow the grass during the seven days the flags were there, 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 from the wind 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 on 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 pictures below. 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.



Stock photo of a veterans cemetery

Flags were laid out on several tables in the Legion Post 6 dining area (see below). 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 tire tracks straddled the flags, sticks were broken off even with the ground and pieces of the flag material and wood were in the mower's path. Shredding of some of the 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 alarmingly high level?

And who will pay? Who should pay?

At a time when Americans are being asked 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. We are at war, for God's sake!

After this story was written, I left town for a week. In the aftermath of this tragic event, the mayor has denied City responsibility and claimed maybe a couple flags were damaged by a mower - the rest by natural causes. That is just not accurate. But if only a few had been run over, did that employee report the "accident" to his superior? If the flags were already on the ground, as suggested by the mayor, did a mower operator knowingly run over them? What kind of respect for the flag is that. They are obviously American flags, printed on both sides. The City took no responsibility and offered to pay for just a few of those destroyed.



I called the Legion office and left a message while in Denver to catch a plane. Upon my return, I called and left another message. Neither were returned. Apparently, the Legion "settled" on some basis with the City and, as the mayor begged, they agreed "to move on." With no resolution as to responsibility, the only changes to be made will be to make the Legion's access to the cemeteries and the display of flags more restrictive.

The cost of the destroyed flags is not the issue. People would pay for replacement. The issue is to deal with this aggression against the flag and to set into place measures to prevent a recurrence. The flag is a symbol that should be respected. Even by City employees.

We report. They repeat.

As the Cheyenne and Casper daily newspapers look more and more alike, to the point of using the same front page picture and story for their Sunday, May 20, 2007 issues, the Cheyenne Herald continues to publish original material. As those declining papers rely more and more on wire service stories and filler material, the Cheyenne Herald generates more and more unique stories concerning issues of local importance and reader interest. And, as the local television station, the only one in this market, concentrates on increasing coverage of markets of little to no interest to Cheyenne viewers - both from Colorado and Nebraska - the Cheyenne Herald focuses on what is going on here - in Cheyenne and Laramie County. We write infrequent stories about national politics, sports and international affairs, but the emphasis is, and has always been, local.

Is it important to have an alternate source for in-depth, detailed coverage of stories which cannot be, or will not be, covered by other Wyoming media? That is for readers of the Cheyenne Herald to decide. Imagine if you had only the Tribune-Eagle and Star-Tribune - and Channel 5 - again.



Yes, Cheyenne and Laramie County should have an alternate news source from those controlled by absentee and indifferent owners or advertisers.

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Flag desecration

(Another story on p. 6)

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 and around headstones.

Did none of them notice the destruction being perpetrated not far from them? Or didn't any of them care? Didn't any hear the sound of breaking wood or see the flag pieces on the ground?

Generally, it does not require veterans of military service to insure proper respect for the flag and to show regard and respect for those who have 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, June 3rd, I was shown a program for the Memorial Day ceremonies from about ten years ago. Virtually every elected state and local official was in attendance. This year, none were. Why? They weren't at the Memorial Day Parade which was conducted at the same time either. Where were they?

Do they just espouse patriotism, not demonstrate it in the simplest ways?

A few years ago, this same American Legion 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. On the days the flags were in place, they made an impressive and patriotic display.

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

The Legion 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 for the current administration.

Fearing confrontation, a timid mayor now refuses to communicate with 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. The Legion does not have millions to spare nor can they request more from the State when they overspend what they do have. The flag programs are important to their mission.

The American Legion, like 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 from the path of destruction, nothing can be done to prosecute but it is now a matter of public record that this city administration employs miscreants who would dare such action.

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 the WT-E jumped on the story. I also suggested they contact Jack Spiker on Sunday so he would know the events.

This is one disclosure I am glad to share. To sit on it for over two weeks would have been a disservice to the Legion and local residents who share the strong feelings of the Legion members, veterans and patriots who find desecration of the American flag despicable.

