



My passion to support the military, veterans, their families, and their friends stems from my work as the Director of the Idaho Veterans Cemetery. In that role, I founded the "Missing in America Project", an initiative to locate, identify, and inter the unclaimed cremated remains of American veterans, helping those who have no voice. This precedent-setting initiative in Idaho, the "Missing in America Project", to locate abandoned veteran cremains throughout the state, and ensure they received proper burial in the Idaho State Veterans Cemetery, epitomized one of the Veteran Administration's objectives, ***"Honor and serve vets in life and memorialize them in death for their sacrifices on behalf of the nation."***

### **The Real Stories**

"The Missing in America Project" has a lifetime of continuous recovery to honor our veterans and their spouses missing throughout our nation – those who do not have a voice. They deserve to receive the free burial promised by our government. I cannot tell you all the stories, but, in 2005, I was taken aback when I learned that the cremains of veterans were abandoned in the most obscure places, for example in the trunk of an abandoned car, a storage locker, and in cardboard boxes on shelves in cemeteries and other government offices.

I even went so far as to learn the true story of a WWII Veteran. His name was an alias, and I had to identify his real name. I learned that due to his erratic behavior based on suffering from shell shock, his wife falsely accused him of a crime. She later changed her heart and story, but he was given a dishonorable military discharge due to these issues. I located his true name and identity, validated the story, and petitioned the VA to change his military discharge from dishonorable to honorable, so he could receive a proper military burial.

### **The First "Missing In America Project" Ceremony - The Beginnings In Idaho**

Faced with the reality the stories of the above, I conceived the vision, organized the mission, and orchestrated the first ever "Missing in America Project" service at the Idaho State Veterans Cemetery, on November 9, 2006, with an estimated 350 in attendance. I secured funds to inter "Missing in America Project" veterans. I coordinated the entire service laying to rest 21 veterans and one spouse, located in Funeral Homes and Coroners Offices in Idaho, providing them with the military honors they deserved, for serving our Nation.



The event included full military honors in a symbolic presentation to honor those recovered with participation from all five branches of service, including a never-done-before simultaneous table topping and folding of the flags, Echo Taps, and a fly over by the Army National Guard Black Hawk helicopters in the missing man formation. This project was adopted by the Patriot Guard Riders, for consideration as a National search for forgotten veterans. I also collaborated with the state governor and Idaho state Senators and Congressmen to draft national legislation for the program.

In Idaho, I found, identified, and provided proper burial with full military honors for 92 veterans and spouses from 2005 to 2007. This initiative also provides a forum for family members or

friends of deceased veterans, who may be living, to identify their loved one's cremains, as the names of the veterans and spouses are posted in press releases and local newspapers.

### **Inaugural "Missing in America Project" Ceremony in Washington State**

In 2007, I was selected as the Director, Washington State Veterans Cemetery, Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs. I have worked for over four years to help design the new cemetery, being the 'boots on the ground' from the property selection, overall design, applying for the Federal Grant, developing the operational budget, hiring the staff and completing the items necessary to cause the successful Grand Opening program on May 31, 2010. I brought the "Missing in America Project" to Washington State, and to further help facilitate the Washington State's Commitment to provide

military funeral honors for unclaimed veteran's cremated remains, in 2008, I facilitated positive relationships with numerous organizations, and I drafted and successfully signed a novel Memorandum of Understanding with the directors of these organizations including the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs, Tahoma National Cemetery, Washington Military Department, Washington State Funerals and Burial Directors Association, Washington Cemetery



Association, Washington Cemetery Board, Washington State Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers, Missing in America Project, and Veteran Recovery Program.

As the "Missing in America Project" continues, on September 12, 2011, the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs, the Washington State Veterans Cemetery, and the "Missing in America Project" were extremely pleased to announce that 62 veterans and two spouses were located in Washington and were interred with full military honors at the Washington State Veterans Cemetery. This ceremony was the largest of its kind to date nationwide. One of the veterans located was a woman who served in the US Marine Corps during World War II and was of Native American decent.

In a ceremony that I designed, all five branches of the military simultaneously folded flags and presented them to the cemetery to be flown on scheduled honors holidays to represent those not yet recovered from each branch of service. ID tags were made for each veteran and draped over custom velvet bags. A flyover, Echo Taps, and Bagpiper participated for the full honors ceremony. Veterans were recovered and transported in part by assistance from the Patriot Guard Riders, Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association, American Legion Riders, and VFW Post 466.

The ceremony was recognized on the Channel 2 News on September 12, 2011; and in a letter read at the ceremony from Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rogers that stated, *"It was an honor, knowing that these veterans are now home, honored, and thanked by a grateful nation. We know you [Richard Cesler] are the driving force and the program would not be happening if not for you."* Other news reports include an interview with ComcastNewsmakers by CNN (YouTube link attached).



### Legislation & Communications

My continuing efforts go to grow the "Missing in America Project" (MIAP) includes my active role in changing both Federal and State law, including Idaho State Law for the MIAP recovery (54-1144); Washington State Code for the MIAP recovery (RCW 68.50.230); and Federal law (Public Law 110-157). The changes to these laws allows funeral homes to release properly identified unclaimed veteran remains in their possession, prevents redundancy in transporting the deceased or the cremains, and has saved the Veterans Administration many thousands of dollars over the past three years. I have also worked actively with Senator Larry Craig to secure an additional \$5 million a year for National Cemetery Grants program, which provides States maintenance and operational funds so that the promise to maintain these facilities as National Monuments to our veterans is fulfilled.

To facilitate the ongoing efforts of the "Missing in America Project" and promote use of Veterans Cemeteries, I have spent the past seven years, building strong relationships with members of the community and stakeholders throughout Idaho, Washington, and nationally to raise the awareness level of the availability of Veterans Cemeteries. I draft and implement communications strategies and grant applications promoting Veterans Cemetery initiatives.

As the project has grown, I leverage all efforts to find and indentify veterans and veteran spouses including using records checks through the National Personnel Records Center, VA, VA hospital records, FBI, online court records, and a subscription to Ancestry.com.

### Endorsements & Award Recipient

I was nominated for and received the distinguished *National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution Community Service Award* for the State of Washington in 2010. My efforts were commended in the nomination letters:



**Cathy McMorris Rodgers, US Congress, US House of Representatives**, said in her endorsement letter (dated September 9, 2009) written to the Daughters of the American Revolution, *"This letter is a testament to the tireless work completed by Richard Cesler on the "Missing in America Project." The Missing in America Project plays a vital and unique role in putting our nation's deceased veterans to rest. Over the last five years the "Missing in America Project" has made possible the identification and proper burial recognition of countless American veterans and their spouses. "The Missing in America Project" furthers our nation's promise to never forget those who served in our nation's armed services."*



**Governor C.L. Butch Otter (ID)**, stated in his nomination letter: *"It is critical that we recognize the service and sacrifice of American service members who have ensured that our American way of life can continue for future generations. For many years through state and federal government service, Mr. Cesler has worked on matters important to our veterans,*

*culminating in the "Missing in America Project" in which he played the critical founding role. Through his tireless work he has helped to bring identification and burial to hundreds of American veterans - work that has brought closure and recognition to the lives of these most honored of our citizens. "The Missing in America Project" [helps] our nation give back to those who have sacrificed on our behalf."*

**Fred "Ducpho" Salanit, MIAP Executive Director** stated in his endorsement letter to the Esther Reed Chapter of the National Society of Daughters of the American Revolution, Washington State Community Service Chairman: *"Mr. Cesler conducted the first "Missing in America Project" ceremony on November 9, 2006. Since then, he has been the MIAP advisor and representative on the National and State levels. Current results (as of September 2009) include: Total funeral homes visited: 648; Veterans Cremains identified: 571; Cremains found: 6642; and Veterans Interred 387. Mr. Cesler's untiring efforts for our veterans is of the highest order and demonstrates his life's commitment. Please consider this dedication to excellence and consider him for this distinguished award."*

### Short Bio

Before taking on the challenge of the "Missing in America Project" and the roles of Director for two State Veterans Cemeteries, I also served as a Veterans Service Officer for the Idaho Division of Veteran Services, Department of Veterans Advocacy where I offered technical assistance to veterans and their families in obtaining entitled veteran benefits. I reviewed benefit applications, provided expertise, and ensured compliance with federal and state laws.

I am a Disabled Vietnam Veteran (United States Air Force, 1966-1970); elected this year to serve the VFW Department of Idaho as the State Senior Vice Commander (next year 2012-2013 I will serve as the State Commander). I am also currently the Commander of the VFW Post 889, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, Past All American Post Commander for VFW Post 63, Boise, Idaho (VFW Post 63 is the eighth largest VFW in the world, with more than 1,800 members and Past District 5 Commander); and I have a Gold Legacy lifetime membership with the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) – National Legacy Life Member (Advisory Board Member); Cooties (VFW); Disabled American Veterans; American Legion; Vietnam Veterans of America; Military Order of the Purple Heart; AmVets; and POW / MIA (Advisory Board Member).



My life's work has been dedicated to veterans and their families through my work in the Veteran community for some 15 years. I have continually coordinated with directors, veterans' organizations, and local military installations for the conduct of military honor services (and I extensively studied such services and act as a Subject Matter Expert). I am pleased that the "Missing in America Project" has lain to rest veterans and spouses who truly had no voice. My goal is to give back to those who cannot speak for themselves. This "Missing in America Project" that I conceived and made a reality, through many hours of concerted effort, tireless relationship building, and navigating legislation to change laws, is grounded in the promise made by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, at Gettysburg:



*"Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.*

*But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."*



Links: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_gwad3NsGz4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gwad3NsGz4)

A [ComcastNewsmakersWA](#) interview

### Photo Gallery:

