

Cremated Portions of Troops' Remains Dumped in Landfill

(WASHINGTON) – Today U.S. Rep. Mike Coffman called on Defense Secretary Leon Panetta to criminally prosecute those responsible for dumping the cremated partial remains of over 274 fallen service members in a county landfill near Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. In a strongly worded letter to Panetta, Coffman urged the Defense Secretary “to levy the strongest possible punishments against those who may have been responsible” for the mistreatment of the remains of the American soldiers.

“Dover Air Force base is the port of entry for the vast majority of the remains of fallen American service members returning to the United States for burial. A few weeks ago, the House Armed Services Committee heard testimony from senior Air Force leaders regarding their actions to identify and correct mistreatment of service members’ remains at Dover Air Force Base. Recent media reports outline far more dire circumstances of disrespectful treatment at Dover. The reports allege that the cremated partial remains of over 274 fallen service members were buried in a county landfill without the expressed permission of the service members’ families,” Coffman said in the letter.

“There is simply no excuse for this and I urge you punish any personnel who may have been responsible for this practice to the full extent of your abilities,” Coffman said in the letter.

“Our nation should never again have to hear a story of a fallen service member’s remains being disrespected here in the United States.”

See below for a full text of the letter.

December 8, 2011

The Honorable Leon Panetta
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Panetta:

I write out of solemn concern for the treatment of the remains of fallen service members at Dover Air Force Base. I fully support your efforts for a thorough investigation into this matter and urge you to hold those accountable for the disrespectful mistreatment of the remains of fallen service members to the fullest extent possible, to include criminal prosecution under public law and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Our nation should never again have to hear a story of a fallen service member's remains being disrespected here in the United States.

As the administration at Arlington National Cemetery works hard to redress years of neglect that led to misidentified grave sites, improper record keeping, and unnecessary hardship to the families of our fallen service members, it is shocking to me that we must also conduct a similar investigation at Dover Air Force Base.

Dover Air Force base is the port of entry for the vast majority of the remains of fallen American service members returning to the United States for burial. A few weeks ago, the House Armed Services Committee heard testimony from senior Air Force leaders regarding their actions to identify and correct mistreatment of service members' remains at Dover Air Force Base. Recent media reports outline far more dire circumstances of disrespectful treatment at Dover. The reports allege that the cremated partial remains of over 274 fallen service members were buried in a county landfill without the expressed permission of the service members' families.

Although the management at Dover Air Force Base reportedly put an end to the practice of interring remains of our fallen heroes in landfills in 2008, I know you share my concern that this was ever the case. There is simply no excuse for this and I urge you punish any personnel who may have been responsible for this practice to the full extent of your abilities.

The men and women who serve as our nation's Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines have few assurances when they deploy to combat to defend our nation. They do not even have the assurance that they will return to the United States alive. One of the few assurances they do have is that if they make the ultimate sacrifice and lay down their lives in the line of duty, then their remains will be treated with the utmost dignity and respect of a grateful nation. As a Marine Corps combat veteran and member of the House Armed Services Committee, I believe this is not only a legal requirement, but also our moral obligation.

I believe the only way to ensure that the remains of fallen service members are never again disrespected is to levy the strongest possible punishments against those who may have been responsible for it. The leadership of this nation must send a message that the disrespectful treatment of fallen service members is utterly unacceptable will not be tolerated under any circumstance.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent and highest priority matter.

Sincerely,

Mike Coffman
United States Congress

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