

Roots in NJ funeral service for *new* Arlington superintendent

By Marie Rosenthal

The new superintendent of the Arlington National Cemetery was a Jersey boy and a funeral director.

Jack E. Lechner Jr., CFSP, began his career making removals, driving and being a pallbearer in South Jersey, he told the FORUM.

"I started working in a funeral home as a trainee right out of high school. I liked having the opportunity to serve people, and I liked that the funeral industry is a business, a profession, an art and a science."

Lechner was in the first graduating class of the mortuary program at the Mercer County Community College, getting his certificate in mortuary science in 1976. He then started working as a funeral director in the Garden State.

"I did my apprenticeship at the Falco Funeral Home in Pennsauken and finished at the Ora L. Wooster Funeral Home in Clementon. I then worked as a licensee at the Stephenson-Brown Funeral Home in Merchantville before co-founding South Jersey Funeral Associates, Inc.," said Lechner, who also encouraged his brother Richard B. Lechner to enter the business. (Richard and his family own the Lechner Funeral Home in Medford.)

Although Jack Lechner enjoyed funeral service, he wanted a different kind of adventure, and his life took a divergent path. "I enjoyed being a funeral director in New Jersey, but I was young.

My time was spent at work or volunteering in the community, and I watched a lot of friends go away [into the military] and come back, and they were going to exotic places and traveling."

He enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1983 as an infantryman and then attended Officer Candidate School (OCS) before becoming a quartermaster. The quartermaster supplies the soldier making sure equipment, materials and systems are available and functioning for missions. Mortuary Affairs falls under the responsibility of the Quartermaster Corps.

The coordination staff at Arlington National Cemetery assure that the family conducting an interment feel as if they are the only ones doing a service that day.

Lechner had a long and distinguished military career from infantryman to the Joint Staff at the Pentagon, where his responsibilities included equipping the Iraq and

Afghanistan National Security Forces. Prior to the Pentagon, he served as chief of staff for the 316th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary) headquartered in Balad, Iraq.

And just when he thought he would retire, he was asked to go to Arlington National Cemetery in June 2010.

Looking back, 2010 was a tough year for Arlington. Army officials were facing allegations that they mishandled interments of more than 200 deceased veterans and their dependents at the cemetery. (Click here to read "Troubles for Arlington National Cemetery" from the August 2010 issue of the FORUM.)

Continued on page 24.



New Arlington National Cemetery Superintendent Jack E. Lechner Jr., CFSP, at an Armed Forces Wreath Ceremony with Major General Jeffrey S. Buchanan, commander of the U.S. Army Military District of Washington, D.C.

Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army.

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Continued from page 22.

After investigating the allegations, a new team was tasked with improving cemetery operations and correcting the issues. Jack Lechner was part of the new team, which was headed by Patrick K. Hallinan and Kathryn A. Condon.

"The issues at Arlington at the time centered on management oversight, and so we primarily developed processes and put these processes in place to make sure there were no issues at Arlington National Cemetery," Lechner said.

For instance, they established a chain of custody protocol. "The chain of custody protocol at Arlington National Cemetery is probably the most stringent in the country. We have someone from the cemetery staff who signs remains into the cemetery, and there is a positive chain of custody all the way to the completion of the interment," he explained.

Remains are tagged and digital images are taken that become part of the electronic record. Every record in the cemetery has been digitized going back to the birth of the cemetery 150 years ago. (See "Arlington National Cemetery celebrates 150 years.")

In addition, all graves are assigned and tracked in a computer system that uses geospatial mapping. Geospatial mapping is a sophisticated logistical program that is used by just about everyone today. It is the software that runs GPS (global positioning system) in your car or smartphone, and is used by many companies like FedEx to track packages or oil and gas companies to find drilling sites. It is also used by the military for planning, training and operations.

"We were the first national cemetery to manage our cemetery with geospatial mapping," said Lechner, who is now licensed in Virginia and Ohio.

Lechner will still report to Hallinan, who was named executive director of the Army National Military Cemeteries and has responsibility for all 40 Army national cemeteries, as well as post cemeteries.

Arlington's missions

Arlington National Cemetery has three missions, Lechner explained, and his goal is to continue to serve these missions.

"The number one mission is that we are an active cemetery. We conduct 27 to 30 funerals a day serving approximately 158 grieving families per week," he said. "We conduct eight full honor funerals every week day."

A full honor funeral includes a horse drawn caisson, military band, matching escort platoon, firing party, military chaplain, military casket bearers, and might include a riderless horse for a funeral recipient who was a colonel or above, or a cannon salute if the deceased was a general or admiral.

"My number one goal is to continue to serve these families with compassion. By far, the most important mission that we have here is this daily interment/inurnment mission. We spend a great deal of effort coordinating interments, so that when a family is conducting a service for a loved one, they do feel as if they are the only ones burying a loved one at that time," Lechner said.

The second mission is as a tourist destination for 3.1 million people a year, and the third mission is diplomatic. Dignitaries from around the world frequently stop at Arlington before conducting their Washington business, Lechner explained.

"I think Arlington National Cemetery is a place that appeals to every American regardless of age, gender or religious belief. Arlington National Cemetery is more important than anyone who works or visits here; it is the remains of these heroes buried here who have consecrated these hallowed grounds," Lechner said.

"Arlington demonstrates to the American public that the government does not forget those who served in uniform and shows how important it is to remember, to pay tribute and memorialize those who have gone before us." 

