

MARE ISLAND

801st awarded for work on cemetery

Thompson will meet with group in person on Feb. 12

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The appearance of the Mare Island Naval Cemetery compared to how it looked like five years ago is about as different as night and day.

There is plenty of credit to go around for making that change take place, and on Saturday soldiers from the 801st Engi-

neer Construction Company of Vallejo received their due.

The 801st were given a certification for Innovative Readiness Training at the Mare Island Naval Cemetery and in honor of the soldier's engineering professionalism and devotion to duty in restoring it. Also on Saturday, Rebuilding Together distributed Safe-At-Home kits to 100 soldiers of the 801st.

Soldiers from the 801st as well as the 322nd Engineer Vertical Construction Company from Sloan, Nev., and senior leaders from the 416th Theater Engineer Command staff in Darien, Ill., partnered with the City of Vallejo for an IRT mission to restore the Mare Island Naval Cemetery after nearly 30 years of disrepair.

The restoration of the 2.5-acre cemetery enabled varied



From left to right: Veteran Nestor Aliga, Operations Sgt. First Class Darwin Negron, Executive Officer Luke Lucido and Rebuilding Together's Elizabeth Hoffman as the 801st Engineer Construction Company receives a certificate for its work on the Mare Island Naval Cemetery.

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civil engineering training for the soldiers, including cutting down trees and overgrowth, restoring and cleaning of headstones, repairing the drainage system, and fixing the perimeter retaining wall. These efforts enabled restoration of hallowed grounds not otherwise eligible for such repair due to local budgetary constraints.

Congressman Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, was not on hand to congratulate the soldiers in person, but according to veteran and longtime cemetery activist Nestor Aliga, Thompson will meet with the soldiers on Saturday, Feb. 12. Despite Thompson's absence, members of the 801st were thrilled for the recognition on Saturday.

"I'm really grateful for this and all the work we did," 801st Operations Sergeant First Class Darwin Negron said. "It was a very good group and we worked well together."

Negron described the group's hard work, which at one point featured 45 consecutive days of work and four straight days where they worked for 24 hours straight.

"The top of the hill where we did the drainage was the toughest part of the job," Negron said. "That and working through the smoke from the fires."

In March 2017, retired U.S. Navy Captain Ralph Parrott of Virginia visited the cemetery and was appalled at its dilapidated condition. Parrott and Dep. Asst. Secretary of the Navy Karnig Ohannessian assisted the City of Vallejo in applying for the Department of Defense Innovative Readiness Training.

Thompson first introduced the bill called H.R. 5588 in April of 2018, as his legislation directed the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to seek out an agreement with the City of Vallejo, under which the city would transfer control of the Mare Island Naval Cemetery to the VA. The cemetery will specifically be placed under the purview of the National Cemetery Administration. That bill became law on Jan. 1, 2021.

In Sept. 2020, the Department of Defense's Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) Program resumed construction at the Mare Island Preserve and the Naval Cemetery. The IRT project includes grading, installation of drainage systems, minor restoration of burial sites, and fence repair throughout the area.

Burials began at this hillside cemetery in 1856 and continued until 1921. The

buried include six Russian sailors and the dog of a former commander. It is the oldest naval cemetery on the West Coast and has been designated as a National Historic Landmark. It has three Congressional Medal of Honor recipients — James Cooney, Alexander Parker and William Halford.

801st Executive Officer Luke Lucido was also happy to be part of the crew and the restoration on the cemetery and acknowledged Vallejo's long military history.

"This is a big reason for us doing what we do, it's not all about being part of the Army," Lucido said. "Our guys love doing projects like this and being able to contribute something big for the community that houses us. While I worked on this I thought a lot about Vallejo and how it has a lot of tradition. It was pretty special."

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