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June 2, 2016

The Honorable Sally Jewell
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Jewell,

At the budget hearing for the Department of the Interior in March, I raised concerns with you about the slow pace of repair at American Memorial Park in the Northern Mariana Islands after Typhoon Soudelor. I appreciated your promise to look into this situation and was glad when National Park Service officials flew in from Guam soon after to inspect the Park. Superintendent James Richardson also took the time to brief me on his plans.

It is now ten months since the typhoon struck, however, and American Memorial Park still looks like a disaster zone. Despite the Park Service announcement in early May that the Park was re-opened “24-7” to the public, the Park’s centerpiece features are unrepaired and massive amounts of debris have yet to be removed. It is time to ask why and what can be done.

So you may see the sorry conditions yourself, I am enclosing photographs of the Park today. At the Court of Honor—where the names of American servicemen killed in the battles of the Northern Marianas in World War II are engraved—the main flagpole remains broken and flagless (Figure 1). The memorial bell tower that was gifted to the Park by the late Ambassador F. Haydn Williams—a World War II veteran himself, who led negotiations that brought the Northern Marianas into the United States and established the trust fund for the long-term care of the Park—is silent and overgrown with weeds (Figure 2). The Visitors Center auditorium is still closed due to typhoon damage and mold (Figure 3). Fallen trees lie strewn alongside pathways (Figures 4 and 5). The marinas are in serious disrepair (Figures 6 and 7). Throughout the Park, “DANGER” signs are posted (Figure 8).

As bad as the typhoon damage may be, however, I also see a larger pattern of persistent neglect of American Memorial Park by the National Park Service. For example, unlike other park units, including the War in the Pacific National Historic Park on Guam, American Memorial Park has no public education programs at all. Mold infestation has long affected all of the buildings at the Park, yet no one appears to be addressing this problem. The playground has been deteriorating for years and is now unsafe for children (Figures 9 and 10). In my March briefing Superintendent Richardson told me there would soon be a community meeting to plan replacement of the many trees lost during the typhoon. To my knowledge, that meeting has never taken place.

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Just this week, as our entire nation observed Memorial Day, the Park Service made no effort to commemorate the 5,234 American servicemen who gave their lives in World War II in the battles of the Northern Marianas and to whom American Memorial Park is dedicated. Not even a wreath was laid. This is disgraceful.

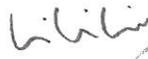
Madame Secretary, the people of the Marianas are not so indifferent about American Memorial Park. In our Covenant of Political Union with the United States we specifically set aside the public lands necessary for the Park's creation. 938 of our own family members are commemorated there—one-quarter of the entire civilian population of our islands, who died in the crossfire. This week, I called for a day of service to restore the Park and over 150 local volunteers have already contacted the congressional office, eager to work.

I am hopeful that with your leadership the Department of the Interior will soon show a similar commitment. One suggestion I have is that you give National Park Service staff on Saipan independent responsibility for American Memorial Park, rather than maintaining the current and clearly ineffective arrangement in which they are managed remotely from Guam.

Let us make American Memorial Park, once again, a place of solemn remembrance and respect for the thousands of U.S. service members and Northern Marianas civilians who died in these islands in World War II.

Please let me know if you need further information, or if there is anything I can do to assist in this endeavor.

Sincerely,



GREGORIO KILILI CAMACHO SABLAN
Member of Congress

enc: as noted

cc: Mr. James Richardson, Superintendent, War in the Pacific National Historical Park



Figure 1. No flags fly at the Court of Honor. Main flagpole remains broken.



Figure 2. Weeds and debris at the memorial belltower.



Figure 3. Typhoon damage and mold at the Visitors Center.



Figure 4. Fallen trees and debris along the park pathway.



Figure 5. Fallen trees and debris along the park pathway.



Figure 6. Damaged seawall at the Smiling Cove Marina.



Figure 7. Broken platform at the Outer Cove Marina.



Figure 8. One of many "DANGER" signs at the park.



Figure 9. Neglect at the children's playground.



Figure 10. "DANGER" sign and weeds at the children's playground.