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Veterans, volunteers overcome wet weather to observe Memorial Day in Washington Twp.

By MARK KITCHIN Staff Writer
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Bergen
State Assemblyman Brian Bergen, R-Morris, was the keynote speaker at the Washington Township Memorial Day festivities on Saturday, May 28.
Photo by Mark Kitchin

WASHINGTON TWP. — The moment the sky rumbled, Vietnam Veteran Chuck Dauchert joked by saying, “in coming!”

He wasn’t wrong. Ten minutes later, and about 45 minutes before the Memorial Day festivities were to begin on Saturday, May 28, it started raining buckets.

Undaunted the members of the American Veterans Association Post 1776 and township organizers of the Long Valley event moved the site from outside the Senior Center to under the roof of Rock Spring Park’s outdoor pavilion. With little fuss or fanfare, the event was held as if it was supposed to be held at the pavilion in the first place.

Despite the steady rain that followed, about 150 people showed up to honor Long Valley’s veterans with a traditional live ceremony, the first since 2019 and COVID-19 forced it to become virtual.

"The weather kind of held," said Mayor Matt Murello. "Thankfully we have this nice pavilion we were able to move everything into. This ceremony means a lot to the people in the township. We have a very engaged veterans group. To be able to do this, and honor the veterans that have passed means a lot to the people in town."

The keynote speaker of the proceedings was state Assemblyman Brian Bergen, R-Morris, an Army war veteran and Apache Helicopter pilot who received a Combat Action Badge and Bronze Star for his service in Iraq. His remarks were about remembering comrades and past soldiers who had fallen so that he could survive. He also challenged the audience to use the day as one of self reflection and motivation to do better.

"I see Memorial Day as a time to demand more of ourselves," Bergen said. "To commit to volunteering more in our community, to give more to charity, to simply commit to being a better person. It's a time for us to take inventory of our personal sacrifices and add more to the list.

"Join me in self reflection and use the day and time to motivate yourself to do just a little bit more, to be a little bit better to repay the sacrifices of these brave men and women through your actions, not just your words."

A touching moment came when six fifth grade students from Old Farmers Road School appeared with the school's outgoing Principal Joe Ciulla. Members of the Veterans Association visited the school earlier in the week for a flag raising and to talk to the students about serving your country.

In preparation for their visit, the students wrote letters to the veterans about the importance of Memorial Day and thanking them for their service. The students read their letters out loud to the audience starting with Tillie Vazquez.

"It is so important that we continue to celebrate Memorial Day because brave men and women fought for peace," Vazquez said. "Soldiers sacrificed their lives for us. Thank you for everything you do for us and those who gave their lives for us."

The master of ceremonies, Thomas McBride, who is commander of the American War Veterans 1776 Chapter, was so touched that he immediately gave the students American Veterans Association 1776 pins commemorating their efforts.

"I very rarely give these out," McBride told the children. "I don't even give these to the veterans. They have to pay for them."

The veterans have been extremely active leading up to Memorial Day. During the past few weeks members of Post 1776 visited the elementary schools, Cucinella and Flocktown-Kossmann, as well as Old Farmers Road to take part in flag raising ceremonies and talk to the students about their experiences serving their country. Also along with members of American Legion Post 342 in Chester, they placed approximately 600 American flags on the graves of veterans in cemeteries throughout Long Valley.

The ceremony overall was held through the efforts of many along with township Recreation Director Darlene Hatcher and others from Washington Township Parks and Recreation. Members of the Long Valley Boy Scout Troops provided the Color Guard and several Girl Scout troop members were active in supporting the event.

Performances given by West Morris Central's acapella group included the singing of the "National Anthem," "God Bless America" and "America the Beautiful." An opening prayer was given by Ingrid Wengart of the Zion Lutheran Church.

The Fallen

Dauchert, adjutant of Post 1776, gave a speech acknowledging veterans lost both in the past and previously. In recognizing veterans who were killed during wartime, he read off the names of Vincent Fields (World War II), Stanley Pfrommer (Vietnam), Larry Maysey (Vietnam), John Lindaberry (Vietnam) and Jamie Smith (Somalia), West Morris Central graduates who died in action. Each name was followed by a gun volley by the Washington Township Police Honor Guard.

Dauchert also acknowledged members of post 1776 and Chester's American Legion Post 342 who died since the last outdoor ceremony. They included Hal Saks, Jim Conroy, John Kessler, Garry Van Ness, honorary WWII veteran Robert Voucher and the 1776 post's last active WWII veteran Allan Johnson, who was among those that laid wreaths in 2019. A separate moment of silence was given to 1776 post member Al Guenther, who passed away on Friday.

Due to the logistics of moving the ceremony to the pavilion, the act of laying the wreath at the veterans' memorial located in front of the Senior Center occurred after the ceremony was concluded. Don Cable, a 91-year-old Korean War Veteran, and Vietnam era Veteran Gerry Kieffer performed the honors by laying the wreath and saluting those brave individuals and what they represent.

"Everyone put a lot of effort preparing for all this," said Kieffer who enjoyed the kid's essays. "You can't cancel just because of a little bad weather."

By the time, the ceremony ended, what had been a steady rain had become just an occasional drizzle and those who left seemed glad that the traditional ceremony was back.

"It's fantastic especially after having so many years without it," Police Chief Jeffrey Almer said. "It's great to honor them. It's great to think of them and bring everyone together."

Among the list dignitaries attending the ceremonies were Congressman Tom Malinowski, County Commissioners John Krickus, Doug Cabana, Deb Smith and Stephen Shaw, Morris County Sheriff James Gannon, County Commissioner candidate and Mendham Township Committeewoman Sarah Neibart and 7th congressional District Candidate Tom Kean Jr.