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Bitter cold doesn't deter veterans from Wreaths Across America duties

By MARK KITCHIN Staff Writer

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Navy Korean War veteran Don Cable places a ceremonial wreath honoring the sacrifice of all former Navy Veterans during Across America ceremony held at St. Mark the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church on Saturday, Dec. 13.

Photo by Mark Kitchen

WASHINGTON TWP. — As much as Long Valley thanks and honors its veterans for their service, it's often the veterans themselves whose actions certify their honor time and again is well deserved.

On Saturday, Dec. 13, volunteers braved the cold to place wreaths on veterans' gravesites as part of "Wreaths Across America". However, it was the veterans themselves and their families who made sure the event on Saturday went on to its rightful conclusion.

Participants this year bought 567 wreaths, 162 more than was the even goal last year.

A Wreaths Across America ceremony was held at St. Mark's the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church on Spring Road.

The ceremony, which is presented by the Long Valley Knights of Columbus Council 10419 and American Veterans Association Washington Township Post 1776 included the placing of ceremonial wreaths marking seven different service organizations as well as remembering veterans who were prisoners of war or missing in action.

Other than the veterans there were only about 30 other attendees. It was asked of the audience for wreaths to be placed on grave stone and grave markers already marked with an American flag. Those in uniform would then salute the gravesite and say the Veterans name and take a moment to thank reflect and remember.

Army veteran Charlie Dauchert remembered the very first day, 10 years ago, when Girl Scout Sara Guida told them about Wreaths Across American as part of her Gold Star project.

"She said she wanted to get the veterans involved with it in Post 1776 and naturally we all jumped at the cause and we started looking into how many of the veterans were buried," Dauchert said.

"Not only in the three cemeteries but me and Larry Oppel did seven cemeteries, some throughout Washington Township and some in Warren County."

Dauchert and Oppel both shared the laying of a ceremonial wreath for the Prisoners of War (POW) and Missing In Action (MIA) veterans during the Saturday, Dec. 13 event, Oppel in memory of the Air Force's Sgt. Larry Maysey, a West Morris Central graduate whose body was never recovered from Laos back in 1967, and Dauchert, in memory of Sgt. First Class Richard Lacey who was member of Dauchert's unit who went missing in action in Vietnam.

Dauchert and many of the other veterans were not fazed by the cold weather work as they placed wreaths at the Our Lady of the Mountain Cemetery on East Springfield Road after the ceremony.

"One year, in the morning we had like a foot of snow," Dauchert said. "We did it. Military people learn to improvise. No matter what the problem is everything seems to come together the morning of. It's nice when the parents bring their children. I wish that we could get more children involved with it."

Army veteran Ed Twomey had a couple of helpers: grandsons Owen and Nate Latzke, who hope to start Wreaths Across America in their home town of Clinton Township.

"It's important especially in towns like this where you have so many" veterans, said Owen Latzke, who was also in attendance last year. "It is a great thing to honor them, remember their service and everything they did for us."

Twomey, who served in the Army, is thankful that Washington Township has taken the veterans to their hearts.

"It's absolutely important," Twomey said. "Veterans have sacrificed a lot over the years in many ways and we owe them a lot of gratitude. It's very important to honor their service and their sacrifice."

"It's unusual for a township to have this kind of a relationship with veterans. The township participation is wonderful."

Wreaths Across America was created in 2007. Its ceremonies occur in sites throughout the United States at the same day and time once a year.

According to “Wreaths Across America,” nearly 5,600 locations, including Arlington National Cemetery, held ceremonies on Saturday and 3.1 million wreaths were placed on veteran’s graves.

Mike Lennon, of the Long Valley Knights of Columbus, said this year the drive to purchase wreaths was so successful that the organizers donated 100 wreaths to organizations in New Jersey that could not raise their goal. The desire of Wreaths Across America is not to leave one veteran’s grave uncovered.

“It is extremely important to remember their sacrifice,” Lennon said. “They give of their lives and some give their lives. We need to remember that even as a member of our community, to appreciate the sacrifices the veterans have made on our behalf.”

This year’s ceremony included a performance by bagpiper Mary Wood Russell and a rendition of the National Anthem by Livi Mancuso. Father Sylwester Pierzak of St. Mark’s gave an invocation.

There were remarks by Lennon, Thomas McBride, commander of the American Veterans Association of Washington Township and Washington Township Mayor Michael Marino. Although they did not speak, Washington Township Committeemen and former mayors Matt Murello and Bill Roehrich were in attendance.

“Our veterans are so very important to us,” Marino said “They are so involved in our community. Any event we do with them is important. This day is super special. We are honoring those veterans that aren’t with us that served us. These veterans went through so many trials and tribulations in their life. We are fortunate that they are still with us to still contribute and serve us. We make sure they are not taken for granted.”

Don Cable, a Korean War veteran, placed a ceremonial wreath representing the Navy, while Twomey put down one representing the Army.

Marine veteran Gloria Koluch placed a wreath for the Marines. Navy veteran John Larkin placed one representing the Coast Guard. Army veteran John Jones did the honors for the Air Force. Merchant Marine veteran Charles Van Stone represented the Merchant Marines and Army veteran John Groel did the same for the Space Force.

Army National Guard veteran and Knights of Columbus member Bernie Schettino, who worked to co-ordinate the effort, directed the audience to go by one of five local cemeteries to place wreaths on veteran's graves. They are: Our Lady of the Mountain, German Valley Cemetery on Coleman Road, Pleasant Grove Cemetery on Califon Road, Middle Valley Cemetery on the corner of West Mill Road and Beacon Hill and the Old Stone Union Cemetery on Fairview Avenue.

"It's cold, the roads are slippery, people didn't come out because of the weather," Schettino said afterwards. "We prevail. There have been challenges in the past too. Fundraising, participation, but this campaign starts in September. It's a great tradition."

MORE INFORMATION





Wreaths Across America returns to Long Valley to honor local veterans