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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **FAYETTE FUNERAL DIRECTOR HONORS VETERANS WITH MEMORIAL**

**Uniontown, PA** – Eight veterans' remains - some of which went unclaimed for more than 20 years - were finally laid to rest Friday, thanks to a Perryopolis funeral home director.

John Fabry, owner of Blair-Lowther Funeral Home, hosted a memorial ceremony for the eight veterans and one veteran spouse at the National Cemetery of the Alleghenies in Bridgeville, in the hopes of providing them a final resting place in time for Veterans Day.

"Four of them died many years ago and they were cremated and left on a shelf in an Allegheny County funeral home - never picked up or properly interred," Fabry said. "We were able to get one of their spouse's cremains to memorialize her, also."

Interred with full military honors were:

- Edward G. Ferguson; died Feb. 13, 2006; U.S. Army.
- Arthur Lindeman; died Feb. 21, 1995; U.S. Army/Air Force.
- Stephen Walsh Sr.; died March 9, 1992; U.S. Army.
- Henry Melonya; died Dec. 26, 1991; U.S. Marines; and wife, Helen Melonya; died July 2, 2015.
- Michele Renee Larson; died Oct. 23, 2018; U.S. Air Force.
- Steve Leninski; died Oct. 24, 2018; U.S. Air Force.
- Theodis Moye; died Sept. 24, 2018; U.S. Air Force.
- Craig Paul McGough; died Oct. 27, 2018; U.S. Navy.

The cremains were interred in an above-ground columbarium crypt, with the Melonys sharing a compartment. The most recently deceased veterans were buried in caskets, with the funeral home providing a hearse for each of them on their journey from Perryopolis to the cemetery.

Fabry, who also owns Goldsboro-Fabry Funeral Home in Fairchance and Kish-Fabry Funeral Home in Republic, said he began burying veterans in January 2013 after the Dignified Burial and Other Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2012 took effect.

Fabry was the first in the country to bury two veterans from Uniontown, Pa., under the act and remains the only funeral home in the state which buries casketed veterans at no charge.



“The government will reimburse the funeral director for the cost of the casket, but I do the rest of the work at no charge,” Fabry said. “I’ve buried well over 100 veterans by now, and Friday’s ceremony makes 39 for the year.

“I just want to get the word out to the general public and other veterans who might not have the financial means for a full funeral that this is available and they are all entitled, along with their spouses and dependent children, to be buried in the national cemetery.”

Many of Fabry’s burials were held with no attendees, while others were attended by members of local American Legions, Veterans of Foreign Wars posts and Masonic Lodges who “have no reason to be there other than they support what we’re doing,” he said.

“It’s really sad whenever you get the call that there’s a veteran waiting for you,” Fabry said. “When you realize they have no family or maybe no finances to have a funeral, it gives you a great sense of relief and accomplishment to be able to honor them that way. It’s my little contribution.”

In addition to the full military honors, Friday’s veterans received an escort to the cemetery by the Patriot Guard Riders; a memorial service featuring representatives from all four branches of the armed forces; flag-folding ceremonies; a performance of Taps; 21-gun salute; and a blessing song.

“We do this whether a vet has family or not,” Fabry said. “One of the sisters of my latest group of veterans called me crying, thanking me for what we’re doing, because the family couldn’t afford to do this. For her brother to have this type of service and burial, she couldn’t believe it.”

It was important for Fabry to honor veterans, he said, because his late father, U.S. Army veteran John Fabry Sr., was disabled after being shot while crossing the Rhine River with Gen. George S. Patton during World War II.

“We didn’t know for about six weeks if he was even alive or not until we got the call that he was brought back to Walter Reed Hospital,” he said. “Consequently, he had a bad nervous condition, hated guns and loud noises were bad. He didn’t like war movies and, as kids, we never played army around our house, because the war really had an effect on him.”

Fabry said he’s proud of what his team does for veterans and strongly believes “if you do things for other people, you’re rewarded.”

“It had a lot to do with my father, but it’s also the right thing to do,” he said. “I think our business has been going great because we do things like this and God takes care of us.”

For more information on veterans’ burial rights, contact Fabry at 724-263-1290 or your local funeral director.



“Veterans have gone and put their lives on the line, protected and represented this country and given us our freedom,” Fabry said. “When you leave this world, your funeral is your last hurrah, so they deserve to have something respectable and dignified. We’re just glad to get to have a little piece of representing and helping veterans.”

Fabry isn’t the only Fayette County resident dedicated to honoring veterans year-round.

In August, Fayette County commissioners Vince Vicites, Dave Lohr and Angela Zimmerlink retired Uniontown’s U.S. Army Reserve Center sign in a symbolic ceremony, which honored the Hopwood AmVets Post 103.

In May, commissioners issued a proclamation officially declaring Fayette the third Purple Heart County in Pennsylvania.

Instituted Feb, 22, 1932, the Purple Heart is a U.S. military decoration awarded in the president’s name to those killed or wounded while serving on or after April 5, 1917.

The countywide declaration came just weeks after the City of Connellsville was declared a Purple Heart City.

Commissioners recognized the county’s many veterans, acknowledging that all military members promote patriotism and foster an environment of good will.

Additionally, commissioners expressed their gratitude for the sacrifices Purple Heart recipients made and encouraged all residents to show them the honor, support and respect they’ve earned.

Zimmerlink said it was important to pursue Fayette County’s Purple Heart status because of the significant number of recipients countywide.

“These members of the U.S. Armed Forces were either wounded or paid the ultimate sacrifice in combat with a declared enemy of the United States,” she said. “We must never forget the sacrifices they made to ensure the freedoms we have today.”

Lohr said Fayette County residents have historically been very dedicated to our country, and the Purple Heart designation is “just a small recognition of that great dedication.”

He said becoming a Purple Heart County will spark a sense of pride in all residents that says Fayette is dedicated to protecting the freedoms the U.S. Constitution provides.

Vicites said all veterans deserve daily thanks and praise for “keeping America free when they answered the call to duty,” and the Purple Heart designation is another way to pay tribute.



“We are one of the highest counties per capita with a veteran population in Pennsylvania, so it is fitting and proper that the Fayette County Commissioners do this,” Vicites said. “We should continue to honor veterans in the United States every day, because America is the number one nation in the world thanks to them.”

In April, a piece of Fayette’s military history was discovered halfway across the country and returned home, where it will spend Veterans Day in its rightful county.

Randall Huston, a 59-year-old veteran from St. Joseph, Mo., was browsing his local Disabled American Veterans Thrift Store when something unusual caught his eye.

Among the thrift store treasures was a metal grave marker bearing the “Ruptured Duck” insignia. More commonly seen in lapel pin form, the symbol was awarded to U.S. military members who were honorably discharged from service during World War II.

Designed by sculptor Anthony de Francisci, the Department of Defense awarded Ruptured Ducks between September 1939 and December 1946.

Huston said the image of the eagle passing through a hoop is meant to symbolize a soldier transitioning back into civilian life. He took the Ruptured Duck home for \$2.25 and started researching its origins.

The grave marker Huston found bears multiple inscriptions: “Presented by the County Commissioners, Fayette, Pennsylvania,” “1941 - 1945,” “Harriet” and “NJS CAS.”

Huston then reached out to the Fayette County PR Initiative team, and the Ruptured Duck came flying home and into the waiting arms of Jim “Whip” Shetler.

Shetler, 72, of Fairbank is a member of the Sons of the American Revolution, Rolling Thunder and American Legion, and first vice president of the Gen. Arthur St. Clair Society.

Although a severe hearing impairment rendered Shetler unable from serving in the military, he has dedicated his life to serving area veterans through multiple initiatives, including the Dog Tag Club radio show on WMBS; Dog Tag Veterans Program, which is in the process of establishing resource hubs for veterans and their families; and various fundraisers.

A retired U.S. Department of Energy employee, Shetler was tasked with identifying the Ruptured Duck’s original grave.

Giving the Ruptured Duck a permanent place of honor is important, Shetler said, because it can stand as a symbol of the many Americans lost in war throughout history - including those close to him.



“Back in the day, they had a buddy system of going to Vietnam. You either went in the draft or ran to Canada,” he said. “I wanted to go with a friend of mine but couldn’t, and he was one of the 58,000 that never came back. A classmate of mine also went and never came back.”

Shetler said the grave marker also serves as a reminder of his father, who returned home from service in World War II in August 1945.

“My dad was parading in his uniform down Main Street in Uniontown when he caught the eye of my mother, right after he came home,” he said. “They developed a friendship, naturally, and they were married for 69 years.”

Shetler said, although the Ruptured Duck has not yet been reunited with its original owner, it still made it home.

“Just like my nickname, ‘Whip,’ stands for, we say, ‘With hope, it’s possible,’” he said.

For more information on the many upcoming veterans events and initiatives throughout Fayette County, contact Shetler at 724-557-2432 or [WHIPT46@hotmail.com](mailto:WHIPT46@hotmail.com).

To learn more about Fayette County, visit [www.fayettecountypa.info](http://www.fayettecountypa.info).

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