

WINTER 2012

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Carlsbad Veterans Memorial Park | Lives Changed by War | Reflecting On Our Past & Future



THANKS, REMEMBRANCE, & CELEBRATION

by John Safin

Many volunteered. Some were required. A great number held strong beliefs about what is right and put it all on the line. No matter the reason, millions of people served in the military to protect and uphold the interests of the United States and its people.

How do you thank a soldier who can no longer hear your words? What do you say to the surviving spouse, parent, and children of someone who fell in combat? How about the veteran who enjoyed a long life and has no one surviving to visit his grave?

“Remember, Honor, Teach” is the motto of Wreaths Across America, a nonprofit organization that started in 2006 based on an idea by Morrill Worcester, owner of Worcester Wreath Company of Maine, over a decade earlier. Worcester had a large supply of wreaths as the end of the 1992 holiday season drew closer. He decided to donate 5,000 wreaths to Arlington National Cemetery, where he had visited as a boy. Worcester’s idea has grown into a national movement

and tradition with over 750 locations participating in the national wreath-laying ceremony. Carlsbad is one of eight New Mexico areas joining in the Wreaths Across America program.

“I found out about Wreaths Across America from coworkers in Los Alamos and thought this was something we could do in Carlsbad,” said Jerri McTaggart, volunteer location leader. “I was so moved by this unique way to thank our veterans that I had to be involved.”

“It was November 2010 when I started Wreaths Across America in Carlsbad. By the time I finished the application, filing to become a nonprofit group with the State of New Mexico, and all the other paperwork, I had a week and a half to

sell the wreaths with a guarantee they would arrive in Carlsbad in time for the December ceremony.”

Jerri accomplished quite a bit in only ten days for the first ceremony held in Carlsbad. “We had 78 wreaths to place on veterans’ graves. The American Legion Riders, Carlsbad Honor Guard, and my family and friends participated. Paula Bauer, from the Carlsbad Caverns National Park, volunteered to sing the national anthem. I was most surprised by how many Carlsbad residents participated. I didn’t have much time or money to advertise the event, but about 50 people were there. It was a humbling experience.”



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Placing flowers as a tribute to military personnel has been a tradition in many cultures around the world and throughout time. The Arlington National Cemetery has dozens of ceremonies each day as another service man or woman is interred. Memorial Day and Veterans Day are two examples of the more formal wreath-laying ceremonies that take place at the Tomb of the Unknowns.



“Wreaths Across America is a year-long program, starting the campaign at the end of January, which leads to the December ceremony. Most of the wreath donations happen in October and November when

people are thinking about the holidays. Once we place the order, trucking companies volunteer space on their rigs to deliver the wreaths all around the country and even around the world. Not all our fallen veterans are buried on American soil.” Jerri noted that three volunteer truckers delivered about 40 boxes of wreaths for last year’s ceremony in Carlsbad.

According to the official website, www.wreathscrossamerica.org, there are several dozen companies with truck delivery services that offer any “void” space – areas where their main cargo won’t fit – to bring the boxes of wreaths to Carlsbad and other areas. Locally, UPS and Walmart have been part of Jerri’s initiative. “The American Legion Riders, Carlsbad Honor Guard, Guaranty Title, Walmart, and La Bella Boutique have been sponsors of the Carlsbad program. We’re all very grateful for the area businesses’ involvement.”

Most volunteers want a simple “thank

Photos: Carlsbad residents participate in the Wreaths Across America event at the Carlsbad Cemetery.

Photo Left Page: Wreaths at Arlington National Cemetery. Placed by Wreaths Across America.

you” for donating their time and efforts. New Mexico Governor Susana Martinez in 2011 and the U.S. Congress in 2008 proclaimed a “Wreaths Across America Day” as a way to show gratitude to everyone involved and recognize the importance of the program.

As special thanks to the Carlsbad corporate sponsors, Jerri includes a giant “Thank You!” sign with the company names on the Wreaths Across America display she puts together for Christmas on the Pecos. “I wanted to make sure



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everyone knows the companies that are helping us. The Wreaths Across America website has a page thanking sponsors who donate \$1,000 or more. It was a special person who served our country, and it's an equally special person who is willing to make an effort to thank them."

The wreath isn't only a thank you to our veterans. It's also for their families. "Military people gave up so much. They were deployed away from home for years. Their families survived on military pay, which isn't much. I just want them and their families to know they're thanked. We simply have a long way to go."

In case you were wondering, there isn't a record of which grave sites belong to military personnel. Many are too worn from the weather to read the inscription. Some of the grave markers in the old, old section of Carlsbad Cemetery are simple wooden crosses. One of the oldest headstones is from the late 1800s, possibly belonging to a Civil War veteran. This is one of the challenges Jerri faces. With all operational and advertising expenses coming out of her own pocket (NOTE: she really didn't want anyone to know this; however it is an important fact), another challenge is building public awareness of the Wreaths Across America program.

Recently, a local Boy Scout volunteered to count all the military headstones at Carlsbad Cemetery, where the Wreaths Across America ceremony takes place. After several hours, he discovered over 1,200 markers. Last year, there were only enough wreaths to lay on 250 grave sites. Jerri's goal for this year is to have 500 wreaths placed. "Ultimately, we want every military grave marker in Carlsbad Cemetery to have a wreath, then enough for all the cemeteries in and around the city, and finally expand throughout Eddy County."

The Carlsbad Wreaths Across America program does more than honoring a veteran no longer with us. Jerri set up the program where a portion of the donation for wreaths goes into a scholarship fund for the children of veterans, alive or deceased. "This scholarship is one of two sponsored by the Employees of Los Alamos National Laboratory Carlsbad. Last year, our Wreaths Across America gave a \$500 scholarship. It's based on a percentage of donations, and I hope we'll have a bigger fund available this year."

The 2012 Wreaths Across America ceremony will be held on Saturday, December 15, 2012, at 10am in Carlsbad Cemetery under the pavilion. The time is a

critical aspect, as all the ceremonies across the country will take place simultaneously with the wreath-laying at Arlington National Cemetery. The wreaths will adorn the veterans' final resting place until mid-January when Jerri and her family will collect the wreaths for recycling.

Yes, Carlsbad Wreaths Across America is a time for celebration. It's a chance to remember our veterans, thank them and their families, and celebrate their accomplishments that allow all of us to have a wonderful life in the United States.

"I encourage everyone to get involved with the Wreaths Across America program, as a sponsor or volunteer," said Jerri. "And when you see a service man or woman, take a moment to thank them for their service." ■

For more information about Wreaths Across America, call Jerri McTaggart at 575-706-0206.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

John Safin has a background in business operations, marketing, event planning, and public relations. Originally from Upstate New York, John moved from Glendale, AZ, to Carlsbad, NM, which he now calls "home." www.johnsafin.com

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