



Full Honors Now Guaranteed at Veterans Cemetery

By Tim Calabro



A three-man firing squad consisting of John Mahaffy, Nap Pietryka, and Mark Conard stands at attention under the command of Todd Wright while Taps is played at a funeral in early May at the Vermont Memorial Veterans Cemetery in Randolph Center. (Herald / Tim Calabro)As Nap Pietryka tells it, “I came to a funeral last fall ... Joe Scott was a friend of mine and he was a Legion member ... the paper said it was to be full military honors.

“Well, all there were were the two flag folders and the bugler ... the absolute minimum required by law. It really bothered me. I thought there should be something more than just the basic minimum done for each and every veteran, and that we’ve got to correct this situation.”

With that, Pietryka, along with Todd Wright, Mark Conard, and David Peirce, all members of Randolph’s American Legion Post 9, contacted the National Guard offices in Colchester and volunteered their services as an honor guard for all veterans interred at the Vermont Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Randolph Center.

The National Guard, which at the time was stretched thin by the scores of Vermont soldiers deployed to Afghanistan, was immediately receptive to the Legion post’s proposal.

Specialist Steve Holt of the Vermont National Guard Honor Guard Detail was able to certify and train the Legion volunteers, and the four veterans (two Navy and two Marine) served as a rifle squad for the first time at an Air Force funeral in the cemetery chapel last fall. The American Legion rifle squad stood outside of the chapel and fired over the cemetery. After taps sounded, an about-face was called, leaving the squad standing at attention, peering through the glass as the Air National Guard funeral detail performed the ritual flag folding ceremony.

Post 9 Commander David Peirce recalls, “it really was an impressive ceremony. It brought a tear to my eye to see that we were honoring the veterans the way they should be honored.”

This year, the Post 9 honor guard, which has expanded its roster to a rotating group of nearly a dozen members, will have performed 30 services by Friday—just under a month since the opening of the veterans cemetery for the season. May is far and away the busiest month for burials, as the ground is unsuitable over the winter months, but Post 9’s schedule goes well into June. More services are being added, sometimes with only a three-day notice. Conard takes these calls and adds them to the schedule, making sure that a delegate of volunteers are available. Of the Legion post’s nearly 100 members, 10 have trained for the honor guard duties:

Wright, Conard, Pietryka, and Peirce, as well as John Mahaffy, Pete Chase, Rachel Osha, Michael Cahill, Ted Buttner, and Ron Schoolcraft.

The U.S. military provides for three levels of honors, depending on a veteran's rank and service. Mark Conard, one of Post 9's original volunteers, said Tuesday, "we feel that every veteran deserves the full show. A veteran went in the service willing to risk his life and do what his country asked him to do, and he should receive full honors."

Thanks to Legion volunteers, services at the veterans cemetery now include a color guard and/or firing squad, along with whatever provisions the National Guard can provide.

In order to perform their duties proficiently under such an arduous schedule, Post 9's volunteers trained for two months this spring, using Todd Wright's Twin Mountain Tool shop on Hull Street as their base of operations. Those available met each Saturday to learn and re-learn the ceremony associated with a military funeral—the order of events, the rifle squad commands.

No one in Randolph's Legion post had performed funeral duties during their active duty. Like all U.S. soldiers, Todd Wright pointed out, they had received basic training, where they learned to march in step, the facing commands, and the myriad rifle procedures, but funeral services are a specialty within the military. With help from the National Guard, Post 9 has been given a full refresher from the pros.

"We feel we're pretty well-trained," said Peirce. "We still have some rough spots, but we're working on it." Beyond the basic rifle and flag duties, Post 9's honor guard has also learned the flag-folding ceremony and has even broken ranks to act as pallbearers on occasion. Conard noted, "we fill in where needed."

The 130-acre Vermont Veterans Memorial Cemetery in the Randolph Center hills is the base for many, but not all of Post 9's honor guard duties. They have also served at funerals in Bethel and the public Randolph Center cemetery, and have an up-coming service in Brookfield on the schedule.

"There are veterans' cemeteries in every state," noted Post 9 commander Peirce. "Of course, this one here is perhaps one of the more beautiful ones because it's secluded, surrounded by trees and mountains ..."

"And, we're biased!" interjected Nap Pietryka to a room full of laughs.

Peirce went on to say, "People come to us afterward and say, 'Thank you for doing this' and I think most of us would say, 'Thank you for letting us do it.'"

For more images of the Post 9 Honor Guard, visit photo.OurHerald.com