

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Local veterans' honor guard looks to recruit new members

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By AMANDA BUCK - Bulletin Staff Writer

He has been a member of the Veterans Honor Guard of Martinsville and Henry County for several years, but the sound of a bugle playing "Taps" and the sight of a folded American flag still touch Ray Dunford.

Sometimes, the Vietnam veteran said, he can't make it through a funeral without tears. Even if he didn't know the person who died, Dunford considers him or her a comrade.

Being part of their funerals, Dunford said, is the least he can do for his fallen comrades.

"This is the last thing we can do for that veteran that gave so much for his country," said Dunford, 65. "This is the last honor we can serve him."

Founded in 1974 by the late George Cox, the honor guard takes part in funerals for people who served in any of the military's branches. In 2006, its members spent 1,955 hours preparing for and participating in 106 funerals in the area, said Dunford, who is the group's commander. World War II veterans are dying at a rate of 1,200 a day nationwide, and that number is high here as well.

That means the guard is called often. All of its members are volunteers, and many have jobs or other commitments to juggle. Others struggle with health problems that make the work difficult.

"In wintertime, it can get down close to zero," said James Rogers, a retired Henry County sheriff who has been a member of the group since 1991. "You're standing out there 35 to 40 minutes ... It's hard on you."

Dunford remembers standing at a funeral in Bassett two winters ago while sleet and freezing rain froze to the surface of his rifle.

Those things can make gathering the eight- to 10-person crew needed for full military



Members of the Veterans Honor Guard of Martinsville and Henry County hold their rifles during a recent funeral service at Roselawn Burial Park. From left, they are: Tom Martin, Harrison Donovan, Donald Kipfinger, James Hunt, John Redd and Billy Barbour.

honors — flag presentation, firing squad and “Taps” on the bugle — no easy task. It’s a job that falls to Margie Dunford, Ray’s wife and the guard’s bugler.

“It’s not like we’ve got a whole crew just waiting for a phone call,” Rogers said. “It’s very hard for Margie to line people up to get the people to do the military honors for the veteran. But it’s something that’s very appreciated by the family.”

Margie Dunford, the only member of the guard who is not a military veteran, said she doesn’t mind the work. She also enjoys serving as bugler, a job she began when a member who had planned to do it had to cancel at the last minute.

In years past, the group had to seek a bugler from an area high school or use a recording. But a few years ago, the guard bought an electronic bugle, which plays Taps on its own, Rogers said.

Although they enjoy what they do, the members know they won’t be able to do it forever. Their big push now is to encourage more veterans to join the group. “Our members are getting very old. I’ll be 82” this month, Rogers said. “I guess the average age is 69. So we need some young people, young veterans in there to help us out.”

Since the year began, several new members have joined the guard. One of them is Catherine Morrison, a specialist in the Army Reserve who served in Kuwait from January 2005 to January 2006.

At 22, Morrison is more than six decades younger than the group’s oldest members. But she said that doesn’t seem to matter.

“It’s a big age difference, but for some odd reason, I fit right in,” she said. “They treat me very well.”

Morrison also would like to see more young veterans join the group.

“It’s something all the military needs to get together and be a part of, because there are a lot of people who are vets who have died and they don’t get a proper burial,” she said.

There is no service time requirement for veterans to receive military honors at their funerals, Dunford said. They simply must be able to prove that they were honorably discharged from the service.

It is important that veterans who are interested in having military funerals let their families know and make sure they can locate their discharge papers, Dunford and Rogers said.

Taking care of that also will make things easier for the families. It is in part for them,

the men said, that they volunteer with the group.

“We always try to say a few words to the widow” or other family members, Rogers said. “It’s soothing words, I guess, something I can say to the grieving people there.” Those same family members often let the guard know they appreciate what it did, members said. Those things make any difficulties associated with the service worthwhile, Ray Dunford said.

“It’s just an honor and a privilege to serve that veteran and his family,” he said. “I love to do the job.”

